

God Yesterday and Today...Part 2

Greek thinking influenced Christianity greatly, as did the Hebrew worldview, shaped by its mythical stories. The Christian story attributed the expectant liberator role, to Jesus. Early Christian preaching presented Jesus as fulfilling God's plan for creation, promising a new creation. When the promise of Jesus returning to complete this work did not come about, the emphasis on a 'new heaven and new earth', became eternal life in heaven. Instead of being the liberator, Jesus came to be seen as the redeemer carrying the guilt of all (fallen) humanity. Life on earth was a trial with heaven as the reward.

St Paul tried using Greek philosophy and abandoned it for the 'illogic' of the cross. His greatest influence became his message of inclusion. The Christian Church (the new Israel) was welcoming of anyone. The gradual breakaway from Jewish synagogue life was forced upon some Christians, because their claims about Jesus were deemed subversive (towards Rome) or incompatible with Jewish belief. Certainly all of the Christian communities believed that Jesus was the anointed 'One', the messiah. It was to be some time, before there would be specific claims of divinity.

Throughout the fourth century there were ongoing attempts to explain how Christians were monotheists, because of their belief in the Trinity. Christian belief proclaimed that there was one 'wholly other' God who was creator and redeemer, and that God was revealed through three persona (or masks), Father, Son and Spirit. Some did not understand the true nature of Jesus. Was Jesus divine or human? There was difference of opinion, and a movement was led by Bishop Arius of Alexandria (250–336 CE) to suggest Jesus was human, not divine.

The early Christian communities had been persecuted, but in a remarkable turnaround, they became patrons of the Empire under Constantinople. Recognising that there were differences of opinion, he demanded that there be common agreement about what Christians believed. Difference was to give way to doctrine following the statement of belief that came from the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, which declared Jesus was fully divine. This doctrine declared that God the creator and Jesus the Redeemer were one and the same (of the same substance).

The Greek church was keen to avoid creating the impression that Christians had more than one god so they differed from the Latin church in how they explained this Trinity. They recognized that any language is inadequate, and no rational explanation is possible. The Latins tried to explain this mystery and in seeking to explain Jesus' role, the Western church introduced the doctrine of original sin, and expanded it under the teaching of Augustine. This doctrine taught that God had damned all humanity because of Adam's sin and Jesus had come to save humanity. The Greek church suggested God would have revealed Godself in the form of a human, regardless of Adam's failure.

Understanding and appreciating the Trinity is perhaps more difficult today than ever, because we live in a rationalist scientific age. Everything we seek to say to describe God leads only to greater wordlessness. The Trinity does communicate a vital aspect of Christian belief – that God is relational and ‘in’ communion. God is not a remote or isolated ‘being’, rather God is a living word, experienced in our own humanity and in the spirit that creates, frees and sustains life. It isn’t the fact that God the Father or Creator is God, and others (Son and Spirit) are subordinate. They are three expressions of God, not persons as we understand persons.

While no single event ever leads on its own to a new worldview, the Black Death in 1347 certainly had a major influence. The Plague killed one quarter of people in Europe (twenty-five million people) and outbreaks continued for three hundred years. Popular preachers of the time, just like fundamentalists of our own era, were convinced that the plague was a punishment from God, and in ensuing years, the fear of hell became as popular in art as it was in preaching. People looked to heaven ‘in the next life’, for relief from their tragic sufferings.

People were encouraged to ‘buy’ God’s favour and clergy handed out salvation for a ‘price’, by selling indulgences. Collections for cathedrals and palaces including St Peter’s Basilica were principally funded by donations for which people were granted indulgences. At one time, ten days out of purgatory was offered for people remaining until the end of Mass! Superstition and piety resulted in practices and beliefs, aimed at avoiding eternal damnation. In the ensuing one hundred and fifty years, two hundred Gothic cathedrals were built to ‘reach God’. Whatever the worldview, there was little or no hope offered in this life, and out of this misery, the Renaissance was born.

Reason began to replace faith. Popular subjects included literature, history, philosophy and art. Renaissance art was dominated by Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci and they had enormous influence. Italy was repeatedly invaded by armies from France, Germany, and Spain from 1494 to the early 1500’s and the invaders were dazzled by the beauty of Italian art and architecture and returned home deeply influenced by Italian culture. Visitors to Italy, such as merchants, bankers, diplomats and young scholars sought to acquire the basic tools of humanistic study and they began to spread their influence throughout parts of Western Europe.

Following the separation of religion and science, humans came to see God like a clockmaker, who, having fashioned and completed creation, now sat back and observed, occasionally interacting to fix ‘mechanical’ problems. This view led to a belief that the laws pertaining to nature could be identified and even controlled. Issac Newton’s mechanistic view of the world coincided to the rise of massive economic growth including mass literacy and urbanisation . There was a conviction that science, technology and reason would overcome all human problems and religion would fade away.

This age saw the English civil war, the French, American and Russian Revolutions and the first and second World Wars, the death camps and atomic bombs of World War 2. Violence on such a grand scale could not be reconciled with human progress. Today we have ongoing wars, persecution, torture, poverty, hunger, tens of millions of refugees, enormous suffering and near ecological disaster. Where can we look for an answer at a time when church credibility is perhaps at an all time low.

As God was gradually sidelined over the past two hundred years, believers hoped that God was still watching from a distance, but mostly they felt God was absent. Prayers encouraged or even begged God to intervene, but the previous belief that God could be discovered at all times, in all things had virtually disappeared from most people's experience. At the same time, with the rise of industry, humans began to see the planet, not as a sacred creation but as a resource separate from themselves, that could be manipulated and plundered for profit.

The Christian God of the early twentieth century was male, remote and living in the sky. This God was the creator of everything and was to be feared and appeased. Popular piety combined with authoritarian Church teaching meant normal belief and practice was little different from hundreds, if not thousands of years earlier.

Homo Sapiens today is different and becoming more so. We live 30 years longer than 100 years ago and we are a globalized community, with increasingly multi-faith and multi-racial people living side by side. Cyborg technology and Artificial Intelligence are still early sciences, but they promise amazing things, perhaps similar to the Newtonian promise. We have learned an incredible amount and achieved amazing things, but we still know only 4% of what is actually in the universe. We do know that God is not above the clouds. We know that God is has not finished creating but believe God is shaping all life through emergence.

A sky god, a fertility god, a male god or warrior god is inadequate for our times. For many Catholics raised with the fear of hell as a place of eternal torment, it was never expected that a Pope (John Paul 2nd) would say in 1999, *"Heaven, or the happiness in which we will find ourselves, is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a personal relation [with God]..... This final condition can be anticipated in a certain sense now on earth. Moreover, the pictures of Hell given to us in Sacred Scripture must be correctly interpreted. They express the total frustration and emptiness of a life without God. More than a place, Hell is the state of the one who freely and finally removes oneself from God, the source of life and joy"*.

We must acknowledge that God is God of all life, not just 'the human' and cannot be 'known'. Images and words are inadequate. God's creativity evokes awe and wonder.

What we have to somehow explore and appreciate is that life seeks life (life wants to live, that death and transformation is a pattern throughout the entire universe and its story and that there is a divine presence revealed in every aspect of nature.

Often when people say “I don’t believe in God”, we need to ask what kind of God they don’t believe in. Often we would agree that we do not believe in the God that others have abandoned. At the same time, we need to reflect on what we can say about God that makes sense to us and what might make sense to our family and friends. What do you believe and how can you express it?

Karl Rahner the Jesuit theologian claimed that “the Christian of the 21st century will be a mystic or nothing”. Just as we had to learn that the earth is not ‘the centre’, so we have to learn that the human is not the centre or the apex of the earth and earth’s creation. God is not just creator, but creating and that is not yet finished. “Evolution presupposes the creation of beings that evolve.” (Pope Francis).

There is a sense of the sacred revealed in nature that primitive people have known and respected. We have to recapture this. We must have respect for all life, appreciating that it is interconnected. What we do to the earth we do to ourselves!

New realities we are discovering about life are changing our view of God and helping us appreciate our connectedness with all life. We have to reflect this change. As PFGM members, we are seeking to reflect the gospel message and experiencing God in our relationships. Is it working?

The God we believe in will be what we communicate to children and grandchildren. What then, can you say about God?

- that makes sense to you
- that make sense to your family & friends
- that you believe?
- that is connected to Family Group spirituality?

What might you have to be conscious of.....?

Whatever else we struggle to understand, we must remember the simplicity of 1 John 4:8, ‘God is love’.

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