

*Sunday next before Lent 2014*

On You Tube I found an old episode of Rag, Tag and Bobtail. If you are not of a certain age you will have no idea what I am talking about. This was the Thursday programme for Watch with Mother and as a child it was my absolute favourite. Looking again at the stiff little animals moving jerkily across static scenery I was amazed, for in my memory, although I knew that they were puppets, and very basic puppets at that, in my imagination they were real and their adventures kept me enthralled.

Now, animation has become so good that we are not in the least amazed by animals that talk and move like humans, by people that can turn into other creatures, or by heads that revolve through 360 degrees. Our imagination is not put to the test in the same way, although we still have to suspend our disbelief, for whether they are puppets or lifelike animations, animals do not normally talk in English.

When we see something out of the ordinary, we automatically seek a rational explanation. I remember one time, when I worked in the Department of Botany in Oxford, and I looked out of the window of my lab and watched in amazement as what appeared to be spacemen set up a table upon which they put large brown glass jars. They then disappeared and there was what I believe is called a controlled explosion. At no stage did I actually believe they were spacemen. In fact my guess was pretty close to the truth, that they had found some ancient bottles of highly explosive chemicals on a shelf in the adjacent chemistry block.

As adults, we fit what we see into our accepted understanding of how the world works. Whilst we may be surprised by events, we rarely have to confront the possibility that what we are witnessing is supernatural.

Is that why Peter seems completely unfazed by seeing Jesus with Elijah and Moses? He talks as though it was the most natural thing in the world! Has he suspended disbelief? Is his belief in God such that he thinks anything can happen?

Not exactly. When a bright cloud overshadows them and he hears a voice, which by its words has to be the voice of God, he is terrified, as are James and John.

What we witness through this story is a dramatic shift in Peter's understanding of who Jesus is.

Up until this point, Peter and the other disciples have accompanied Jesus on his extensive travels. They have watched as he talked to the crowds, as more and more people flocked to hear his stories. They have been thrilled by the miraculous healings and they have enjoyed being a part of his entourage. They have got excited by his bravery in attacking the corruption of the religious

authorities, they have felt that they were part of a cutting edge group that championed the poor, that were not afraid to befriend the beggar or eat with known miscreants. And within this framework they ceased to be surprised by Jesus. He can walk on water – why not? He can talk to Moses even though Moses has been dead for thousands of years – of course. And in the excitement, they have somewhat lost sight of what it is all about.

It is a bit like getting married. It is so easy to get bound up in the details of the reception, the dress, the flowers, the music that the marriage gets lost. Often with a couple it is only at the wedding rehearsal that it really sinks in – this is for real. There may then be tears, nervousness, fear. At one rehearsal, when asked “is there anything else you would like to ask?”, one young man answered, ‘how do I get out of this?’ The reality finally sank in and he realised this was not for him.

Peter has a similar moment. He was jolted out of his excitement at being associated with Jesus by nothing less than God. Peter suddenly knew this was not just about travelling and healing, not about preaching and teaching, not about baiting the authorities, not even about justice and poverty, this was about God. Suddenly it all became very real and really rather scary.

Peter has laughed with Jesus at mealtimes, enjoyed the banter as they walked, and of course, listened to his parables and teaching. But if Jesus was the Son of God, that changed everything. The teaching had to be taken to heart, followed, even the hard bits about suffering. Jesus, his friend Jesus, was now different. He would never be the same. They ought to be on their knees worshipping him. But the fact that they could joke, could eat and drink and have fun with him, how did that alter their view of God? The scriptures implied that God was remote, strange, fierce. Moses alone could look at him. Others, even if they touched the ark of the covenant, were struck dead. Yet God seemed to approve of Jesus and the way he lived.

The words that so terrified the disciples changed their view of Jesus and of God. God could no longer be thought of as a remote being to be placated by keeping the laws to the letter. He was more intimately involved in human life than that. He was and is right at the centre of all things. And if they read the prophets, they knew this already.

We had a reading at last week at evensong that fits incredibly well with this. It was the passage from the Book of Revelation which describes the throne room, with its central throne and 24 surrounding thrones. There are the strange terrifying creatures with lots of eyes and six wings, singing, constant worship, and flashes of lightning. It is quite a terrifying image. I have to say, reading it, my immediate reaction is not ‘Oh, I can’t wait to see that.’ But there is no doubt, reading this, that God is at the centre of all things, He is the one in charge, the one who is all powerful.

And I think that is what Peter really took to heart on the mountain top.

Being part of a religious group or a church is fine, but actually totally irrelevant unless God is at the centre. But tragically, so often the religion becomes more important than God.

Where in our thinking, in our decision making, in our experience of the world around us, in our religion, is God? Is He there at the centre? Is He the most important, the most powerful, the one to whom all creation looks? Or is he somewhere on the periphery of our vision or even completely out of sight. Far too often we put ourselves or some organisation such as the church at the centre. Everything revolves around ourselves, our personal comfort or security or happiness or desired status. When we achieve something we take the credit. When we fail, we find someone nearby to blame. When we are thoughtful, when we make good decisions, we congratulate ourselves on our wisdom. When we are kind, we bask in the knowledge that we are loving.

The reality is that love, wisdom, kindness all come from God. We can be agents but not their creator.

The reality is that God is at the centre.

When the disciples walk back down the mountain, they have a different perspective. They still quarrel, they are far from perfect, but they are beginning to understand something very important. It is not about following a man, or a cult, but about being a servant of God. They are learning that it is not about being an important person in Jesus's group, but about allowing oneself to be used by God.

They had to encounter God and therefore be afraid before they could learn this. Jesus was the one to teach them that. He touched them saying "get up, do not be afraid".

He taught them that God is there in the laughter and the fun, he is there where there is poverty and injustice, he is there in the beauty of the natural world, he is there where there is suffering and death, and he is there in the love that is eternal.

Our task is to know this reality, to place ourselves in the path of God's gaze, where we can be bathed in that love and wisdom that emanates from him alone. We cannot put ourselves there by our own strength, but Christ can show us the way. By following his teaching, his example, even when the path leads us to pain and suffering, we come to the glory to God, to the source of all creation and all love. We are able to look at the world anew, to see beauty and joy and compassion and know that this is real. Amen.