

When teaching, whatever the age group or subject, you occasionally get surreal moments where you begin to wonder whether you have actually said what you thought you said. I had one when teaching on the Guildford Ministry Course. We had a weekend on bereavement and funerals. It was intense, there were lots of tears as people realised that they had past losses that they had never managed to accept, but there was also laughter, for the blackest of moments can be quite funny in retrospect. Towards the end of the weekend, each student had to prepare a very short funeral address on John 14: 1 – 6. Some were moving, some profound, and one..... one was different. It concentrated on the sentence 'no-one can come to the Father except through me.' It was a resounding call for people to repent before it was too late, but, as we pointed out, it was by his argument already too late for the person that had died, and so not necessarily the most pastoral of talks.

His response stunned me – 'you never said it had to be pastoral.'

In amazement I replied: 'have you not listened to anything at all in the past two years?'

I think Jesus must have felt like that when Philip said to him 'Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.' Wasn't Philip listening? Had he not heard anything that Jesus had taught over the past months or years?

The trouble is that none of us listen. We think we know already. How many of us ever change our minds about anything? When we enter a debate we know what side we are on from the start. When we meet someone new we make up our mind about them within a few seconds.

And, and maybe this is more critical, we are never satisfied.

There is a whole list of things that would make life better. If only I could afford a holiday I would be satisfied; if only I had a new job, if only I was taller, if only I could lose a stone, if only my child would not cry so much, if only my wife could cook, if only Every person's if only is different, but when those wishes come true, there is always another if only ready to take its place, a new condition for satisfaction.

It is the same situation regarding proof. How do we know what God is like? Where is the proof? We can't see him, we can't hear him. We have the record of Jesus, the record of scripture, and the physical world around us. Those are our clues.

What is fascinating and worrying is that even those who have really studied the bible, spent hours thinking about scripture and the words of Jesus, do not agree. Yet the nature of God is fundamental to Christian belief and practice. There are three essential aspects of God described in scripture.

The first is the love of God. This is the love that is so all embracing that it wants all creation, every person whoever they are, to be in relationship with God. This is the love that poured itself out upon the cross, that would go to any length, any amount of suffering, to heal a fractured relationship, that would forgive all past hurts in order to mend that relationship. This love is not forced upon us. We can reject it. We can turn our back upon it, such is the nature of free will. Equally we can accept it as it is, a freely given offering.

The second is the Holiness of God. He is other, set apart. Our minds cannot really begin to grasp God who can encompass all space and all time. We constantly try to imagine him on our scale, because that is easier to manage. Scripture does better with angels and archangels constantly praising him singing 'Holy, Holy, Holy.'

Then there is the wrath of God. It is quite clear in scripture that God is against evil; there is no place for it in God's kingdom. Here is the purifying fire, that burns up all the dross. And herein lies the problem – how do we interpret this. Was my student right to stress the need to repent before it is too late. Surely better to offend a few people than have them risk hell fire? Is it true that anyone who has not accepted the gospel by the time we die we are judged and found wanting and doomed to endless torment. Does God really punish in that way? My interpretation is that it is not us, not God's creation that get destroyed, but the evil within us that gets removed, and we have to allow that to happen. We can refuse by hanging on to our power and status, our jealousy and greed. The result of refusing to let go is a kind of torment, for with all the trappings of our physical world we can never come into that close offered relationship with God. If we let them go, which will be a painful, difficult and humbling process, we will find ourselves in God's arms. But the choice is ours. God waits on our choosing. I sometimes find myself with Philip wanting to say, 'show us the Father and then we will be satisfied, then we will know.' Then I read the gospels again and think, we have the answer here in front of us. This is a gospel of God's unconditional love. It is a gospel of hope not just for the chosen few, but for all people, indeed all creation.

But what then about the passages in the bible about judgement. In the Old Testament, there was a realistic statement that evil created problems for future generations. The phraseology was of its time: 'I am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers'. This was a matter of fact way of dealing with sin in this world. Later, when belief in life after death flourished, it was not just this world that mattered, but how or if life continued after death. Paul in his letter to the Romans says that since all have sinned, all are justified freely by God's grace. Death is not a barrier to God's forgiveness and correction, for as Paul puts it 'I am convinced that neither death nor life will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. There are indeed many parables that relate to punishment. The parable of the feast, where those who dressed inappropriately were cast out into outer darkness where there was wailing and gnashing of teeth. There was the parable of Dives and Lazarus, where Dives was in the fire of Hades. The Book of Revelation says that the wicked will burn in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. These metaphors speak of the pain of isolation from God, an isolation but I do not believe that it is an isolation imposed by a punishing God, but one that we impose upon ourselves if we will not or cannot accept his all-encompassing all forgiving love.

The overwhelming message of the gospel is that there is forgiveness and love for all. True, there is no place in God's kingdom for selfishness, greed and all the other evils that cause so much hatred and pain, and they have to be removed. But this is the action of a loving God, not one that is vengeful or vindictive. If we know the Father through Jesus, we have only to look at his life and teaching to see that God does not demand an eye for an eye. Jesus turned the other cheek, accepted all the pain and suffering upon himself, did and does everything to restore our relationship with him.

We have been shown the Father. Let us be satisfied, for there is nothing greater than his love, and if we are not satisfied by that, we are indeed lost. Amen.