

Sunday 29 October 2006: Last Sunday after Trinity/Bible Sunday

The creative word of God

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-11; John 5:36b-end

“If you are a religious person, it was like seeing the face of God”. Those are the words of George Smoot, an American astrophysicist, who along with John Mather, another American, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics earlier this year for their work on the cosmic microwave background radiation. Smoot was describing his reaction to the detection of these ripples of heat radiation which are believed to be the remnants of the Big Bang - the explanation most widely accepted by the scientific community for the origin of the universe. The ripples of energy point us back to the infancy of the universe, and it seems for some people at least, to the possibility of a creative power behind that universe. Reading the accounts of some of this work, even with my scientist’s hat on, I find myself extraordinarily moved by the possibilities it unfolds and often by the language used by those involved in this work. Another physicist, Joel Primack, whose work was foundational to that of Mather and Smoot, described his own reaction to the “awesome reality” to which his work points in these words:

“We are actually answering questions today whose very asking used to be a religious act. When we interpret the ripples in the cosmic background radiation, we are reading God’s journal of the first days. What human action could be more sacred than that?”

Ripples of energy with tiny variations in the temperature of this radiation giving us clues into the very moments of creation, the birth of galaxies, and those ripples continuing to echo through the universe something like 14 billion years later.

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Today is Bible Sunday – a day when we acknowledge the centrality of the Scriptures to us as a community of faith. But in celebrating the written word of scripture we also try to focus our minds on what it is that connects that written word with the creative word that spoke the universe into being – that creative word so gloriously captured in that passage from Isaiah we heard earlier, and in the profound meditation on the purposeful word with which our scriptures begin. In the opening chapter of Genesis, the word of God pours forth with creative intent: God said “Let there be light”; God said “Let the waters bring forth swarm of living creatures...” God said “Let us make humankind in our own image” – those pulses of creative energy finding their echo in the ripples of cosmic radiation that permeate our universe today, calling forth diversity, creativity and endless possibility.

The prophet Isaiah’s meditation on that theme, has for me at least, the same sort of cosmic perspective.

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

But Isaiah’s cosmic imagery also takes us on to another level in our encounter with this living word. For the purposeful creative word which he describes is one that continues to speak, not just into the physical structures of the universe, but into the deepest desires and longings of

our hearts, challenging and cajoling us into an evaluation of all that we strive for and all that we hold dear.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

Listen, so that you may live. Listen to the pulses of the creative, purposeful word that speaks through the word of Scripture. Listen so that the response that is called forth from us by these words which we hear and read week by week and day by day carries the echoes of that creative purpose, that we, too become the elements of God's handwriting in the world today.

Well, that's the ideal. That's the vision for a community that is shaped and nurtured by its encounter with the living Word – the word that speaks through creation, through the Scriptures, through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

That's the ideal, the vision and with that in mind, I look at the Church, I look at the Anglican Communion and find myself asking, how on earth have we become a body that tears itself apart in disputes over the authority of scripture, and the interpretation of specific texts? How on earth have we managed to turn this creative, life-giving purposeful word into something we beat one another over the head with? How on earth have we become so focussed on using the written word to back up our own entrenched positions that we have lost sight of the living word which it reveals?

"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

Jesus' words to the Pharisees are a startling reminder of the capacity within all of us to be so obsessed with that which preserves our own self and self-interest that we become blind to the deeper truths that move us into new possibilities, new encounters, new revelations of God's purposes.

It's all too easy to turn words - even religious words enclosed in leather binding or painstakingly inscribed on fabulously illustrated manuscript – into propaganda that attempts to work our will on others, or to manipulate into action or belief.

The American writer Eugene Peterson has pointed out the danger of turning words into information and hence into commodities.

“Words,” he writes, “are removed from their originating context in the moral universe and from personal relationships so that they be used as tools or weapons. Such commodification of language reduces both those who speak it and those who listen to it also to commodities”.

I don't know how we as the church have reached this point, but it seems to me that all of us on all sides, need to step back and think hard about the ways we use and abuse the scriptures and the authority contained within them. For the authority of scripture, such a divisive issue amongst Christians, surely lies, not in its use as a tool or a weapon, but in its ability to speak to us of the creative purposes of God. The authority of scripture surely lies in its capacity to prompt those who hear it to the same creative purpose rather than to close down our capacity for creativity and new possibilities. Perhaps one of the ways to test the authenticity of any of our reading of scripture might be to ask just that – does this prompt a sense of creative

purpose in me and others or does it turn me and others into a commodity to be used or disposed of at will? Does it open doors or close them?

Charles Darwin – and who would expect him to be quoted in a sermon for Bible Sunday – wrote movingly of the capacity of the laws of nature to produce a rich and extraordinarily varied creation:

“There is a grandeur in this view of life,originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one. From so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved.”

The words of scripture which lie deep in our consciousness as Christians, should have that same capacity to produce in us new and evolving responses. Those words of scripture which we hear week by week as they act as a source of imagery for our prayers, hymns and sermons, pulse through our souls like the creative breath and cosmic energy of God. They linger in our hearts, minds and imagination. In simple words and in our response to them, lies the potential for us to be a people shaped by the Word of God, to be a community of creative purpose. From simple words, lies the potential for us to become those in whom the living word accomplishes that which God purposes.

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.