

Trinity 15

In his book *Things you get for free*, former Jesuit Michael McGirr argues that there is a crisis of belief today, but not the one we usually identify. He argues that the crisis of belief is ours: that people inside the church too often refuse to believe that those outside our traditional structures can experience the love of Christ. God loves and guides the Church but is not bound by it. In the terms of today's parable, God makes sure that those who always seem to be last have the chance to be first. In Matthew's telling the parable spoke to Jewish contemporaries and Jewish Christians who were resentful of come-lately gentile converts. It speaks to us as insiders to the practice of the faith, urging our outward-looking and imaginative generosity.

One of the great divides in the world is between those who resent others and those who rejoice in them. All too often we get stuck in squabbles which are really the sibling jealousy of the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son (the usual title of that parable, which is really about the prodigally generous *Father*, is a dead give-away). It is easy to see the world through a resentful lens: 'why should that person have what wasn't given to me, or be given what I had to earn, or receive that which I failed to achieve by hard work': this is the opposite of Jesus's teaching. The parable of the workers in the vineyard is clear: we don't earn or *deserve* the things of true value: they are 'things we get for free'. That means we may not resent other people having them. God does not rate us according to what we earn or deserve: he simply looks on all of us with love. Those of us who resent sharing that benevolent gaze have more growing up to do.

I recently preached a series of sermons on the parables, so I don't propose to say more than this about today's parable. But it has led me to think further, following last week's sermon, about how we need to have a conversation with and learn from those who are *not* here this morning; those who grapple with the same questions we do but don't have the light of Christ as a guide. Last week I quoted two articles in the secular press reflecting on self-examination and on what finally matters in life when we face the end of it. There were striking similarities in the writers' conclusions to what we would say inside the Church, but they aren't here, literally or otherwise. One of you said to me afterwards that, in conversation with the world, it is dogma that gets in the way. I've always felt moderately bored by dogma, so that cheered me up. We need doctrine and dogma: it is how God guides the Church, as I said earlier. But we must never mistake it for God.

There's a well-used tag attributed to S Gregory of Nyssa about this:

'Concepts create idols. Only wonder comprehends'.

This saying has gained such popular currency that even the Archbishop of Canterbury has been using it. I must admit to coming across it first not in the collected writings of Justin Welby, nor in any reading of the Church Fathers, but in the introduction to the recently published *Companion to Fellini*.

Struck by this phrase there, I thought I'd better track it down somewhere more theologically respectable. I discovered its origins to be strangely elusive. Everyone attributes it to S Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian Fathers who helped formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in a way that would stand up to contemporary philosophical scrutiny, (no doubt issuing a warning to himself). A few sources footnote it to Gregory's *Life of Moses*, which considers how we can approach God (basically by saying what God is not).

Eventually I discovered out that the precise phrase, 'Concepts create idols. Only wonder comprehends' is an aphorism coined from Gregory's thought (and certainly true to it) by Jurgen Moltmann, the great German Reformed theologian beloved of Fr Peter McGeary. The phrase has been attributed to Gregory himself by the Christian motto-industry, illustrating our contemporary preference for the sound-bite and our limited theological attention span (also our desire for a

celebrity behind the tag (Gregory will sell more tea-towels in Christian bookshops than Jurgen Moltmann). So well shared has it been that I had found it in reference to Fellini's artistic credo. Fellini's version, incidentally, was, 'the visionary is the only true realist'.

Gregory and some of his mates urge us to approach God not by tying him down in formulae, but by saying that he is not a *thing*. 'Concepts create idols. Only wonder comprehends'. In Gregory's *Life of Moses*, referring to the First Commandment [Exodus 20.4], he writes,

The divine word at the beginning forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men since every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.

The technical word for Gregory's theology is *apophatic*, proposing that God should be defined in terms of what we know He is *not* rather than what we might speculate Him to be. Hence the wonder, which he also urges.

That's fine as far as it goes, but a bit hard to share in polite conversation. If, rather as Jesus might, you flip it over and seek the wonder or awe, you are on a more constructive track.

'Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything.'

That is true to the Gospel as well as the first commandment: it's the glory of the Word becoming flesh, God walking among us as a person. If we have enough awe or wonder at that, at what we are offering to others, it will communicate, and is essential to sharing our faith.

As Bishop Rowan Williams writes,

Evangelisation is always an overflow of something else – the disciple's journey to maturity in Christ, a journey not organised by the ambitious ego but the result of the prompting and drawing of the Spirit in us. In our considerations of how we are once again to make the Gospel of Christ compellingly attractive to men and women of our age, I hope we never lose sight of what makes it compelling to ourselves, ...

If we want to bring people to Christ, or rather back to the Christ they've forgotten, or lost, or didn't realise was already present unacknowledged in their lives, our first step is to recover the joy of our first falling in love with God, and to display an infectious enthusiasm for *our* church as a place to experience wonder.