

Seeing Jesus - Knowing God

October 25, 2009

St. Paul's United Church, Richmond, ON

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost 2009

Job 42:1-6

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Mark 10:46-52

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

As I prepared, a new book by Harvey Cox caught my eye. It is called, *The Future of Faith*. He says that there is a "profound change in the elemental nature of religiousness." His first book, in 1965, was *The Secular City*. It asked how the church was to be, when the church was being pushed to the margins of life. Not all that he said then turned out to be true. In later works, he prepared us for the saying - "I am spiritual not religious" - as the world the church must respond to.

The other thing that caught my eye was a review of Karen Armstrong's new book, *The Case for God*. It quotes her opening sentence:

We are talking far to much about God these days, and what we say is often facile.

She is disappointed that the hard core atheists refuse to debate any Christians other than conservative fundamentalists. She comments:

In our democratic society, we think that the concept of God should be easy and that religion out to be readily accessible to anybody.

And that people on

both sides of the public debate assume that everybody knows what God is: the Supreme Being, a divine personality, who created the world and everything in it.

They look perplexed if we suggest that God might have other, different attributes.

What is at stake is how we understand God. Most of the time we don't talk about what God is really like at all, because we know. Most of the time religious folk are able to live inside the view of God that they learned as children and it sustains them throughout their entire life. But that comfort zone is disappearing.

We are in a time of great potential because people actually struggle with questions about where and who is God, for them and their children. We are in a time when there are new and exciting insights about the nature of God and how God is related to all of creation.

Cox defined our immediate past as time of the age of belief. This is a time of orthodoxy and not much room for pluralistic views. This is where statements of faith are important and taken literally, even as one might reject them. This is what many outside the church criticize or reject, that there is one true explanation. The church is seen as propositional - accept this idea or you are a sinner, there is only one way to understand our faith statements.

What we are moving into is the age of Spirit where there is “no standardized theology, no single pattern of governance, no uniform liturgy, and no common accepted Scripture.” It is a time where all our faith statements are our best approximation, based on reason, a critical reading of the bible, and reconstructing our theology. Thus this is a time of both excitement and chaos, of energy and closing down, of jumping into the future or seeking of comfort zones of the past. It is a time to take courage, to be bold in our faith, to claim new understandings of God that will guide us into the unknown future.

Both our passages this morning are dramatic descriptions of new understandings of God. In each text an old understanding is deconstructed and a new vision is elaborated in its stead. This is the experience of epiphany - a word which literally means showing or manifestation. In God’s appearance to Job, in Jesus’ encounter with blind Bartimaeus - each of these passages are epiphanies: first hand accounts of seeing and experiencing God differently.

After 40 chapters of suffering, of feeling abandoned by everyone, including God, and getting bad unsympathetic advice from his friends and his wife, Job finally gets his answer when God appears in overwhelming beauty and majesty. God poses a series of rhetorical questions - questions to which there can be no reply because the answer is so obvious. Nevertheless, our Job is no slouch, and he knows a good thing when he sees it. So he’s not about to let what has become a real conversation with God disappear. So he responds with his description of his epiphany, ending with the phrase that has unfortunately come into our religious vocabulary as “worm theology.”

Now I have to say something about that self description as a worm. It has come down to us a prescriptive, as a measure of our guilt and unworthiness. That is not how Job meant it. He was being descriptive - trying to describe for us something of his experience of the awe and wonder he felt in God’s presence. And he says that human beings are to God as worms are to human beings. It’s not a moral judgement. Trying to comprehend God is like a worm trying to comprehend a human. Job knows something about God’s nature that is new and astonishing. What is affirmed is: God is a God that desires relationship with us, and is continuously seeking us out of God’s boundless love and compassion.

Bartimaeus is blind, is outside his religious and social community. He is an outcast. It is an audacious act for him to speak to anyone. He should be an invisible nobody that we can toss spare change to without disrupting our thoughts or routine. Yet Mark makes that impossible, first by having him speak directly to Jesus, and secondly by using his personal name.

He claims equality; his right to address another person. He may be physically blind, but he is spiritually sighted. Bartimaeus, just on hearing Jesus’ voice, has insight - he sees the Christ, the messiah in Jesus. He sees the kingdom of God through Jesus.

In daring to call out to Jesus, Bartimaeus initiates a theological transformation which Jesus acknowledges and continues by telling him to stand up and come over - to take his place as a full human being. The physical

healing of Bartimaeus sight is a metaphor for his restoration to a transformed community. He truly belongs to God and God's kingdom. Seeing Jesus was to know God in a new way.

To have a God-encounter requires that we go through a Job-like experience. It can be a dark night of the soul experience. We have to get to the point where old constructs, old ideas, the structures of our faith that were so familiar and comfortable that they fit us like our favourite faded blue jeans - become so unsatisfactory that we can't hold onto them anymore. This is the experience of doubt: doubt in our faith, ourselves, our God. Doubt helps us see what in the faith of the past has become tasteless, even frustrating. It helps us grow spiritually. The experience of epiphany will be ours. In the words of the mystics and sages of our faith, God must become void and emptiness, then enemy, before God can again be friend.

When God feels distant this is our clue that we are yearning for something deeper, yearning for God, for communion with God, for a closer encounter with God. God is luring us to deeper reality: God breaking down the old inadequate religious words and images.

This is an exciting time then for the church. For a church that is open to the deep struggles that we all experience, not only open but welcomes such exploration, will be attractive to those who are spiritual but not religious.

Our search for God is like a musical experience. It is felt and like music it comes through practice and participation in music. It is to know not only the notes but to let the notes rise into harmony and intensity. Like music the knowledge of God is never fully attained. It is knowledge that always leads to a kind of unknowing.

In that moment we have an epiphany, a new insight into the beauty of God. God becomes friend and lover. Sometimes we can experience it as a mystical, transcendent encounter. Other times our experience is through the relationships that we have, the tender mercy we feel for others, and that they show to us.

In our moments of insight, we see, we join that movement to bring harmony and justice to all.

George Hermanson

www.georgehermanson.com

The Ottawa Citizen; Sunday, October 11, 2009 page B1-B2. Douglas Todd, Religion & Ethics Editor, Vancouver Sun.