

Snoopy, Moses and God

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 19 October 2014, by David Gill. Readings were Exodus 33:12-23, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 and St Matthew 22:15-33.

Back in the days when we read newspapers instead of computer screens, we could look forward to a daily diet of comic strips. My favourite was "Peanuts". Remember "Peanuts"? It featured Charlie Brown, who was one of life's victims; Lucy, one of life's irritants; and their dog Snoopy, one of life's wise commentators.

In one strip, Snoopy's doghouse had burned to the ground. A great tragedy. He'd lost his record collection, his pool table, even his Van Gogh painting. We see Snoopy sitting there, surveying the ruins, when Lucy turns up and decides to give him a burst of religion. "You know why your doghouse burned?" she says. "Because you *sinned*, that's why". Snoopy responds by sticking out his tongue and saying "Blah!". In the last frame we see him thinking to himself "Her kind deserves to be blah-ed".

I'm with Snoopy on that. Shonky religion does deserve to be named and shamed. And there is an awful lot of that kind of religion around right now.

It seems to get airplay whenever disaster strikes. Within hours of a major catastrophe someone, somewhere, is sure to say that God is punishing the victims. Exactly what God is supposedly punishing them for varies according to the speaker's tastes.

Take Japan. In 2011, after its tragic tsunami and the meltdown of Fukushima's nuclear power plant, the governor of Tokyo said, unwisely, that all this was "divine punishment" for people's greed. Pakistan's 2002 earthquake had Osama bin Laden claiming that Allah was punishing the country for – yes, you guessed it – Pakistan's support of the US-led war on terror. South East Asia's terrible tsunami on Boxing Day 2004 was, according to a former chief rabbi of Israel, God's retribution on those who were trying to get his country to withdraw its troops from Gaza.

Then there was the Christchurch earthquake. Within hours of that tragedy, a Utah-based website had announced that God was giving New Zealanders their

comeuppance because of – you’ll love this one -- “lesbians running loose on the south island as if they own the place”.

Snoopy would have known what to do with that!

We hear such statements and we cringe. We cringe because life is not that simple. Because it’s always wrong to exploit anyone’s suffering to promote some agenda of your own. Because there’s something deep in the biblical faith that warns against wanting to know more than we mortals ever can.

Take the first reading we heard this morning. Moses is anxious. An identity crisis, perhaps. Maybe a crisis of faith. Possibly a mixture of both. To approach the future confidently, he thinks, he must know more about this elusive God he is trying to serve. Moses pleads with the Lord: show me your glory.

No, says the Lord. You will see my goodness, but nothing beyond that. “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live”. When my glory passes by I will hide you among the rocks and cover you with my hand until I’ve passed. Then I’ll take away my hand and you’ll catch sight of my back. “But my face shall not be seen”.

You will glimpse a little. But beyond that, Moses, you’re going to have to get used to the mystery, cope with the ambiguity, endure the uncertainty, live with the not knowing. Those baffling question marks must remain.

In Australia’s present religious climate, we need to hear this little vignette as a warning. For if the Christian faith is in trouble today – and it certainly is – that is not because of attacks on us by people of other faiths. Nor is it, primarily, because of the very vocal contempt of our secular critics.

It is, I think, in part anyway, the direct result of forms of religious belief that positively invite mockery and rejection. We religious types can be our own worst enemies, especially when we talk as though we’ve penetrated the mind of God, as though we have the divine mystery all sorted out, as though we’ve deleted all life’s question marks and replaced them with exclamation marks in bold. Whenever we behave that way, we claim too much.

Christians, along with our Jewish and Muslim cousins, have good reason to be wary of such arrogance. For the Hebrew scriptures, to which all three religions owe much, warn again and again that God is inscrutable, beyond comprehension. The divine mystery, very rarely, may be glimpsed -- but at best from the corner of one's eye, never face-to-face. There are to be no idols, no names for God, no images of God, and that means philosophical images as well as physical ones. Beware the notion that you've seen God, much less are capable of portraying him.

The 20th century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber put it well: "Woe to the man so possessed that that he thinks he possesses God". And, we might add, woe even more to the church or other religious community when it labours under the same delusion.

Leaders of the early church knew the danger. Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century theologian, warned "Let him who would pry into the mind of God, remember how little he knows of the mystery of the mind of an ant!" A generation later, St Augustine of Hippo offered what would become a much quoted saying: "Si comprehendis, non est Deus" – "If you think you understand, then it's not God you're talking about!" – a warning, incidentally, that should give pause to our secularist friends when they ridicule faith, just as much as to our fundamentalist buddies when they imagine they're upholding it.

To secularists and religious people alike, and to religious fundamentalists of every label – Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, the lot -- the message is: just a moment, life is not that simple. Do not be so sure of yourself. Tread more softly. Listen more carefully. Speak more gently. Wonder more deeply. The mystery at the centre of human existence deserves, from us all, more awe and respect, less arrogance and presumption. Don't pretend to know it all. Nobody knows it all.

For nobody has seen the face of God.

But somebody, Christians claim, has been close to God's heart. St John's gospel puts it in a nutshell. "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known".

The gospel writer here is using “heart” the way we often do in English as well as some other languages. He’s referring not to the red thing banging away in your chest that keeps your blood whizzing round in circles, but to what is at the centre of your existence, what holds you together, what makes you the person you most truly and distinctively are.

Someone has been close to the heart of reality, the heart of the impenetrable mystery pulsing through all things, the heart of the vast silence that surrounds us in life and in death, the heart he dared to call “Father”.

Those who knew the man of Nazareth well soon took this claim further. Not only had he been close to the heart of the mystery. Somehow, in a special way -- uniquely, they said -- he lived it. He embodied it. He was the Word made flesh, the Eternal in time, God incarnate.

Now that, whether you accept it or not, is a truly staggering claim. Breathtaking. As the writer Dorothy Sayers once commented: “You may call that doctrine revelation or you may call it rubbish, but if you call it dull then words have no meaning”.

Dull it most certainly is not. For if the claim is true, then there *is* light in the darkness, there *is* love in the loneliness, there *is* grace in the emptiness, there *is* meaning in the madness. And there *is* a home, in the heart of God. For you. For me. And for a wandering world whose destiny still waits, with strong arms outstretched in welcome.

Be grateful for the mysterious love that has uttered its own Word, that has enabled us to glimpse its goodness, that has revealed itself before our wondering eyes.

The love that meets us, again and again, here, at the table of the Lord.

The love that accompanies us through this day. Through all our days. And beyond.

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