

The God We've Never Seen

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 5 January 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the second Sunday of Christmas were Ephesians 1:3-14 and St John 1:10-18

For the commercial world, Christmas ended with the close of business on December 24. The St Stephen's choir knew it had survived another festive season when it gasped out its last carol on Christmas Day, croaked its last threefold amen and staggered off for a well-earned break. Most of us felt it was over when the rellies went home, the dishwasher was loaded and we could put our feet up after the last party.

But the church, wisely, says: not so fast. It keeps us in Christmas for twelve days until tomorrow, January 6, the day called the Epiphany of the Lord. I'll talk more about that next Sunday.

For now, we're still marking Christmas, still singing carols, still listening to what the bible has to say about Jesus' birth. So it's no surprise that today's readings centre us again on the mystery of the incarnation.

First, the joyful outburst from the letter to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ" in such an amazing way. Reading it, or listening to it, you have the feeling the writer could barely contain his excitement. In the original Greek, today's passage is one long lyrical, breathless sentence - the fullstops we have are a gift of the translators. "Blessed be God ..".

Then, the majestic language of St John's gospel, on the significance of Christ. Remember how today's passage ends? With the words "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".

I don't know about you, but when I come across that statement I usually skip over the first, negative bit to concentrate on the positive that follows. "No one has ever seen God"? - well, we know that, don't we. A statement of the obvious, really. Just common sense. So, ignore it, and focus on what matters: Christ has made him known.

But maybe ignoring the negative statement is a mistake. Maybe, in the present religious climate, we need to hear it afresh. And hear it as a warning.

For if the Christian faith is in trouble today - and it certainly is, at least in Europe, North America and Australia - 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, the direct result of forms of religious belief that positively invite mockery and rejection. We religious types sometimes can be our own worst enemies, especially when we talk as though we've sussed out 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. When 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 images of God, and that means conceptual images as well as physical ones. Beware the notion that you've seen God, much less are capable of portraying him.

Some have commented on my tendency, in sermons, to use the word "mystery" when referring to the divine. It's not just me. There is a whole stream of Christian theology, running through the centuries, that emphasizes the elusiveness of God and the inadequacy of human utterance.

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" - which translates roughly as "If you think you understand, then it's

not God you're talking about!" Many centuries later, the reformer Martin Luther would speak of *Deus absconditus*, the God who hides himself.

This important part of the Christian tradition reminds us that a decent silence about God is in some ways preferable to an over-familiarity. It should give pause to secularist friends who are eager to ridicule any talk of God, as well as to fundamentalist friends who seem to think simplistic God-talk somehow upholds the Christian faith.

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's 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 God.

But somebody, Christians claim, has been close to God's heart.

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 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. No wonder the writer to the Ephesians was almost lost for words.

It's a staggering claim. 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 lies there, waiting, in that stable in Bethlehem.

Be grateful for the love that uttered its own Word, that made itself known, that broke itself open before our wondering eyes. Be grateful for the love that meets us, again and again, here, at the table of the Lord.

Be grateful for the love that accompanies us into this new year. Into all our years. And beyond.

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