

LENTEN MEDITATION

The Venerable John Beer

Trinity College

What we don't know about God 8. 3. 09

Ecclesiasticus 18: 1-14

Luke 8: 40-end

In 1769 over 3000 people died near Venice when a local church fire, started by lightning, ignited 200,000lbs of gunpowder being stored there. Soon after, the Roman Catholic Church dropped its resistance to the use of lightning conductors in churches. At first, they'd imagined that these recently invented contraptions would provoke God's providential action. It's almost inconceivable now that God would be seen as having a problem with lightning conductors. Whether we like it or not, our belief about what God's like and how he acts is constantly, if subtly, developing. The way we believe things to be true about him is simply different now from, say, the 18th or 4th century, though we may agree that the Church's accumulated knowledge about the basics of Christian faith down the centuries hasn't really changed.

But how do we know things about God ? Well, of course, the Bible, in one sense, contains all we need to know about him, to believe, to be saved, but that doesn't mean that it tells us all we can know about God. Nor does it mean that God's so knowable that there's nothing left for us to know. But just as there are things about him that we don't yet know because he's God, so we don't even know the things we don't know about him. This is Donald Rumsfeld territory ! For daily life and prayer, of course, we have the Bible and a sort of credal shorthand, but God's still a mystery - he's beyond our imagining, that is - however matey we are with him in prayer, and

conversation with others. In TS Eliot's phrase, 'Words strain, crack and sometimes break ...'. And yet, we believe that this God of immensity and mystery has touched the world with the intimacy of a kiss. For the human family has in its possession a precious heirloom, a miniature of God – Jesus. God's immensity was once 'cloistered' in the womb of Mary', and this Jesus, as the epistle to Hebrews says, bore the 'character' of God himself, in human form. The analogy is of Roman coins, stamped with the image of the Emperor – the 'Χάρακτηρ in Greek - the imprint of God's face. And this divine coinage was minted to be common currency with us all. Jesus and the Bible, then, tell us so much about God, but the historical Jesus wasn't the whole of God, and it took the Church centuries of really hard thinking to get the words for all this right. This tradition of 'faith seeking understanding' in hearts and minds, in reason and prayerful reflection - caused the Church to accumulate a treasure-house of understanding about God, not to supersede the Bible, not to trap or control him, but to draft into service all human faculties to deepen understanding of how faith elucidates 'the Faith'.

But God, as the Bible might well have said, is often elusive. 'I am what I am.... ' says God, not simply what you have made of me. So God can look after himself, though we're often desperate to protect him from an unbelieving world which says nasty things about him. It's not enough to say that because Christianity must now compete for a voice in a society of many strident voices, that we must equally stridently defend God. Ironically, it's when the Church has tried hardest to police belief and trap God in doctrines and resolutions, that Christianity has lost its way. If we ask, 'Do we know that God exists?', then of course the answer is 'Yes', we believe, but remember that God doesn't exist in the world as we, or a tiger, exist;

he's outside time, yet mysteriously in time, the inventor of time, just as he's the inventor of love. Everything we've learnt about Jesus suggests that our elusive God is faithful, constant, that he answers our prayers, according to our needs more than our desires, that he longs for our well-being, though he may not always take away from us suffering or mess. Therein, lies something of the mystery - the 'what we don't know' ness - of how he loves us. God surely isn't a 'genie in the lamp' kind of God, simply ordering the world to suit selfish Christians. He will not give the Archdeacon of Cambridge a parking space simply because he's more holy than you. Surely, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ doesn't give people parking spaces in that sense ! God, in choosing to act, never acts on demand, but always providentially, balancing need against desire or desperation.

And desperation brings us to that sick woman in the gospel reading.

The same twelve years which the dying girl's life had filled had emptied this woman of what she had. For her imprisoning illness involved bleeding, and there were strict taboos about blood in Jewish society, and about coming out in public when bleeding. Jesus' ancestors, searching to know what they didn't yet know about God, had in good conscience devised these rules to protect his holiness. But, sadly, they were often a means of control, not just for Jews, but enemies. So, for example, around 65AD, Jewish scholars with stunning cruelty against the hated Samaritans declared that all Samaritan girl babies were to be regarded as capable of menstruating from birth.

This woman, then, in coming out into the crowd, contaminated in a religious sense everyone she touched, including Jesus. But she reaches out to touch the hem of

his cloak and is cured. Jesus, distracted for the moment, gives sacramental value, healing, to this brief encounter.

But then, news comes that the girl has died. The house is full of the sounds of death, but he tells them that she's only sleeping. St Luke isn't wanting to underplay the miracle; no, she's really dead, not in a coma, but sleeping in God's protection.

And Jesus, who himself will soon be raised up, has come to raise her up. Read St Mark's version, and we get closer to what Jesus must actually have sounded like; *talitha cum*, in his native Aramaic, 'Get up my darling...'

There's a great poignancy about these beautifully woven together stories. For we know that for all their miraculous effect, not everyone who reached out to touch Jesus in their need could be healed. By design, as it were, the incarnate Son of our omnipresent God couldn't be everywhere at once. And perhaps in that willing divine limitation lies a clue to how God's suffering love was made flesh in Jesus; it's bound up with a cross, planted in a world made by God, but seemingly unfair in its distribution of health, healing and goodness. For there's just too much pain, dying and unfairness, for us to speak of some easy calculus, devised by a God who heals all pain in some simple way which piety can render down into miracle, or market as the guaranteed product of having enough faith.

The God we know, yet can't, in the end, fully know, makes his power and love available for all who seek his help, as in the life of a man on a cross whose life once slowly drained away from him as saving power, just as the lifeblood had slowly drained from that woman's frail body. And we're touched by that woman, for we can imagine something of the sheer misery of her life, before she reached out to touch her Lord, risking everything. The word 'touch' pervades the gospel reading. To have

faith is to risk being touched by things we can't yet fully know; by an untiring God who keeps faith with us, though we may not always flourish, be successful, or free from pain.

A Lent term, when the cold can often eat into the soul, making faith, and sometimes close relationships, feel a little more fragile than we've become used to, a Lent term demands of us trust in God, though the cost may take much out of us. Lent itself is a good time to take stock; to broaden our tiny horizons and expectations of our mysterious God who's constant and never forgets us. Never in need of an early night, he keeps awake so that all who need more sleep may rest in him. But Lent is also a season for abstinence. And might we abstain from stridency, that fashionable overweening certainty that Christians know all about God; for in this world at least, we touch only the hem of his garment. Though the God we know speaks bespoke to each of us, he will not be domesticated like a pet. And if, in ten years time, you and I are still faithful, then be certain that our knowledge of this God will have subtly, or even radically, changed. And Lent 2018, as now, will demand humility before this God, reticence, an abstinence from self-interest, as well as the assurance of faith. For, in the end, what we do know about the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is that grace is everything. Life is gift, and faith is gift, not right or demand. So, in the face of our God who is beyond us, yet alongside us, the Christian life is to be lived graciously, generously. And all the rest is commentary.

John Beer