

Sung Eucharist, 18th Sunday after Trinity 2019

Genesis 32:22-31; 2 Timothy 3.14-4.5; Luke 18.1-8

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. (Genesis 32.31)

One of the curiosities I've found of having a medieval title in the Church of England is that no one really understands what on earth you do. In fact, until very recently my father was labouring under the impression that, as Chancellor, I would be solely in charge of the finances which, if he'd thought about it more carefully, should have led him to write an advisory note to the Bishop.

Chancellors, I try to explain when asked, have a role in 'learning and engagement' but this too, I'm afraid, is often met with blank expressions. Well, what does that mean? So I go on to explain that a chancellor in a medieval cathedral would have been the schoolmaster and so it is that I am tasked with helping everyone who comes here, even in some small way, to enter into the mystery of the Christian faith and formation.

But therein lies a trickier question because education, and indeed Christian formation, is across the Church of England now a pretty rum affair. Confirmation preparation is weak where people are still confirmed at all, the task of apologetics – of defending the faith in the public square – is generally feeble and one only needs to listen to our Synod to recognise that most people now prefer to speak about their feelings rather than God.

And a cathedral is above all, certainly prior to becoming a fairground, the teaching seat of the Bishop – his or her *cathedra*. In the early Church, a Catholic bishop was distinguished from the high priests of the mystery cults, with their secret meetings and esoteric teaching, by his willingness to sit in the public square, to defend the faith and to be a teacher himself. As we hear Timothy being told: 'proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.' (2 Tim 4.2) The utmost *patience* in teaching.

There's is a clue. For, the teaching of the Church is not primarily about dispensing information – the Church acting like a British tourist abroad hoping that by somehow speaking more loudly, Jonny foreigner will be more likely to understand. Rather Christian formation doesn't begin so much with us, as with God. It is something that we ought to think of as a gift, a blessing, a grace. As Carol Harrison, the Lady Margaret Professor at Oxford has written 'I'd like to suggest that catechesis does not so much communicate *knowledge* of God as faith in and love of God; it is not so much a matter of letter as of the spirit.'

And, indeed, this was crucial for Augustine's understanding of Christian formation, particularly in his prologue to *On Christian Doctrine*, where he makes it clear that to learn about God is not like learning about the species of trees or history. This is a point regularly lost on Dawkins: God is not an object among others, 'a *point in the world* to which other points relate and in terms of which they naturally and plainly organise themselves'.¹ God is beyond our natural reach. As Augustine famously remarked, *Si comprehendis not est Deus* – that is, if you can get your mind around it, it's not God. For Augustine, there is only *one* point in the world where God is entirely transparent and that is in the incarnate Word; the Son of God, Jesus Christ. But, even here, Augustine urges us not to think we can treat this as a worldly 'thing' - as something 'to be enjoyed as a purely world object'. Rather, as *God's* speech it draws our hearts and minds to an entirely new form of seeing, a new shaping of our desires, of our learning to see all creation, through Christ, as a gift from the hand of our Creator. This is to speak of the mystery of God in terms of his sheer, incomprehensible, enormity.

A story about Augustine relates how when writing *On the Trinity*, he decided to take a break and went for a walk on the beach (he lived in Hippo Regius, a coastal town in north Africa). While walking, he saw a boy behaving rather oddly. He kept going to the edge of the shoreline, filling a spoon with seawater, and then emptying this into a hole in the sand. Augustine kept watching, bemused, until he asked what he was doing. The boy pointed towards the Mediterranean and told Augustine that he planned to empty the entire ocean into his hole in the sand. Augustine dismissed this as an impossibility: 'you can't fit the entire ocean into that tiny space'. The boy is supposed to have replied: 'And you're wasting time writing a book about God. You'll never fit God into a book'.

Now, even if that story is almost certainly apocryphal, it does highlight to us that to discover God isn't about undertaking theological degrees. Nor is it about learning moral truths (as so much of our dismal school Christianity presents it). Rather, to see the face of God is, as the story of Jacob informs us, more akin to a wrestling: a wrestling that will regularly leave us head over heel, a theology which will be discerned as much as in our tears as in our teaching; and a teaching that can speak because it has first listened; listened in prayer, to the Spirit, groaning with all creation for our redemption (Romans 8.22). Like Jacob, the blessing will often only be found in the aftermath, in the fresh morning sun and limping to that door where, unlike the persistent widow we will find not a cantankerous judge, but the embrace of our Father welcoming us home (Luke 18.7).

¹ Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (Bloomsbury, 2016), 45. "God alone is the end of desire; and that entails that there is no finality, no 'closure', no settled or intrinsic meaning in the world we inhabit.

A patient discernment of the love of God discerned in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: in the Scriptures, in the Church, in our own lives. *That* should be the offering of our so-called ‘learning and engagement’; nothing less than what John Donne called ‘the exceeding weight of glory’². May we have a glimpse of this immeasurable richness now in God’s gifts for God’s holy people. Amen.

² John Donne, *Selections from Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions and Prayers* (Paulist Press, 1990), 172; quoted in Alister McGrath ‘Rooted in the Bible and history: How the creeds can help with faith formation’ in S. Croft (ed.), *Rooted and Grounded: Faith Formation and the Christian Tradition* (Canterbury, 2019), 20.