

31 May 2019 – Service for the Royal Academy

First reading: (Book of Revelation): And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful. And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

This World is not Conclusion (373) by Emily Dickinson (1830-86)

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—
It beckons, and it baffles—
Philosophy, don't know—
And through a Riddle, at the last—
Sagacity, must go—
To guess it, puzzles scholars—
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown—
Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul—



It is a letter written by Vincent Van Gogh that I think provides me with my starting point in considering what a priest might say to a church full of artists. On Varnishing Day, perhaps it is appropriate, although not a lot of actual varnishing might have gone on, given the variety of forms of visual art and the plethora of materials that you will have used, on Varnishing Day perhaps it is appropriate to quote a painter.

'I want to paint man and woman with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolise, but which we now seek to confer through the actual radiance of our colour vibrations' ([ref: The letters of Van Gogh p 151 ed Mark Roskill 1972](#))

Just as, for the most part, contemporary artists have left halos behind as a way of expressing the divine presence in relation to humanity, so reflective Christians respect the theological equivalent of halos – pre-modern expressions of doctrine and belief - but now look for ways to express the mysterious presence of God for a post Enlightenment society in new and imaginative ways. Just as some might ask why we still paint landscapes when we have photography, Christian faith wants to ask questions not just about what is seen, but about the quality of seeing, and explore the assertion that we ourselves are seen by the unseen God.

It's a question that occurs in buildings like this on days like these – especially if we're not in church very much - a fundamental

question; is there God, and if so, what is that God like? The Christian answer is twofold: yes there is a God. But also an immediate recognition that as soon as we try to speak about God or even use the word God, we are lost.

Last night, we celebrated, in the Christian year, the Feast of the Ascension, when Jesus finally disappears from view. This festival itself is a neat illustration of the dilemma I have posed. It's a story easily dismissed by sceptics who do no more than imagine two feet sticking out of a cloud and condemn it as a fairy story. The theological equivalent of a halo. But if it is a story told as a way of expressing the beginning of Christian mysticism, the ascension, the movement from body to spirit, the elevation of our eyes from the everyday to an ethereal reality beyond; now this really could be a Christian feast for artists.

Well you might say, why are you still talking about the ascension in the 21st century - that's the church doing what it does best - answering questions nobody's asking - answering questions people used to ask but have moved on. Fair enough - but Christian faith, the communal life of this church, lively in its services, political engagement and social commitment, is expressed not in a list of things to be memorised, but in a language to be learned.

It's in places like this on days like these that the deeper questions can emerge and float to the surface of our consciousness. What about God? What about the hint of spiritual life that somehow draws us out, calls us beyond ourselves? And from time to time invites us to ask this really difficult and mysterious question; is there God? What's God like?

The advent of Christian mysticism finds its roots in the ascension of Christ and we heard its fruits in the incomparable language of the Book of Revelation read today. As many meaningful pieces of prose begin, it begins with 'And'.

'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.'

I can't hear this beautiful Scripture without remembering it being read by the actor Richard Attenborough. His eldest daughter Jane, and his 14 year old granddaughter Lucy were drowned in the 2004 South Asian tsunami. I was at St Paul's Cathedral at the time and we organised a national televised memorial service attended by the royal family. The stories of people overwhelmed by the water were heart-breaking. And Richard Attenborough read this lesson from the book of Revelation. Of course he read it beautifully, his trained voice inhabiting his grief. But even his training couldn't get him past the verse penned by St John of Patmos 2000 years earlier as he read

'for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away. And there was no more sea'

In this moment, the mystical vision that Christianity offers collided with the equally powerful human experience of grief, a paradox that is also vividly present in the stories of faith told every Easter as Christ dies, and leaves the disciples bewildered and afraid.

And so if there is a guiding principle for what Christian faith offers in a world still today sceptical as it was at the first Easter, then it is this; the insistence that spiritual things matter in material ways. And that material things matter in spiritual ways. The two are connected, inseparable, melded together.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

This is a promise not yet fulfilled, not yet seen, but not unseen either. And even while we witness to the struggles and griefs, the joys and kindnesses of life in the world, we remember that the opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty.

We remember again that the most important thing we can do with God is not believe, assent to God's existence or not – but to trust. To lean in, lean on the possibility of God. It's a 'stake yourself' kind of faith. This is the only kind of faith that makes any sense in a world where even today many people will suffer unimaginable distress and disorientation in the world's events and mistakes.

The gift of the artist is that of imagination; and imagination is key to a life of faith too. Emily Dickinson has it right in her poem, which we heard in today's service too.

*This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—*

It's hard to imagine something that is so undefinable – and ultimately it's really important that we know all the words we find are totally inadequate, that language is completely useless, although we can't stop ourselves trying. But I heard a professional astronomer once – talking about the birth and death of stars in space and the creation of black holes, describing what he thought was the energy that bound and shaped the universe. As he showed amazing pictures from the Hubble telescope, he started to talk about the scientific fact that the universe itself is expanding – and that the rate of expansion is increasing. The universe is growing now – and the rate of growth is accelerating. As his studies led him to see the movement and energy, the life and death of stars, the spectacular super nova images from light years away – his description of the fundamental energy he observed was dynamic love.

There is no better way to describe what Christian faith and the vision it presents is trying to get at.

And so the question remains; is there God, and if so, what's God like? In contemplating this question, the mystical answer imagines

the energy that is God – the energy that underpins the universe, that breathes life into the mystery of humanity and which holds and sustains all that is; imagines this dynamic life but will not ever leave it to its own devices by unmooring it from everyday life in the world; human, creaturely, plant and insect teeming life. In one rather technical word that modern theologians use to try to talk about this transcendent presence in the universe is hidden an ancient wisdom and vision in itself; *pericoresis*. Which simply means an eternal dance.

Of course we use the word God as a noun. But also God is a verb – God is interrelational, flowing, dancing, love.

When the theological ground on which we stand is that before we start contemplating God, God contemplates us, it results in a reversal of our expectations that it is up to us to debate and decide what God is like, that God gazes at us before we gaze on God, we become the one who is gazed upon, appreciated, loved: and in this contemplative space, it is possible to hear an irresistible invitation to live – to join in the dance, to let go of our own tightly held rigid pointscore exchanges with which we fill our week, to release ourselves from our focus on what I can get out of you and how I can get on, independently from you; and allow ourselves to fall into this dynamic loving interdependent way of living. And as we fall, we hear the words of the mystic Teresa of Avila who assured us that we cannot fall out of the everlasting arms of God – we can only fall into them.

We are invited to live this spiritually alive life. To discover the mystic that lives inside each of us. Not to ignore it or suppress it, but let it out; our sneaking suspicion that there is more, that we are a walking invitation to one another to live in the energy of that mysticism. It is a huge challenge in that it makes us vulnerable to one another, and encourages us to commit to a way of life that is anchored in love; that will not insist on its own way, that will not be boastful or

arrogant or rude; a way of life that rejoices in the truth and will not delight in wrongs or keep score.

This is not only challenging but a playful way of life; we probably don't say this often enough in church – faith is playful, irresistible, irreducible.

*Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul—*

It is a way of life that as Emily Dickinson knows well will bring perhaps embarrassment if anyone sees our rather tender hopes in love or in the future or in God or in now. We are invited to live life

ascended, but life rooted in the world too - in the manner of Christ. A life that is both undefended and undefeated. Open to the elements, open to love and therefore expectant of grief.

The mystic inside you is where you have not lost hope, where you face down any hint of cynicism, where you know that inner life is contemplative but not static; a life that is irrigated by love.

And if we have forgotten how to pray – or if we never knew, we might just try to pray even for the will to want this way of life; to want to want to live this way; because it's a dangerous prayer to become awakened to the mysticism that is innate to you. It's not a safe way to live – but it is the life for which we are made.

It is, in the manner of Christ's life, a beautiful life.