

Last Sunday, when Paul Hoey of Church 21, the Church of Ireland Parish Development programme, was with us, he was challenging us to reflect on how we see ourselves as a Church. As he reflected on Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet, he focussed on a vocation of service, ourselves as a servant community, serving Christ, serving others in the name of Christ.

In the course of his sermon and in conversation with a group after the service, he spoke of the need for a church, a community to develop a vision for itself. But before that we need a clear understanding of our values as a community. Vision, values – these can all too easily remain as fairly nebulous terms. During the week I was turning over in my mind what do we understand by 'values'.

As I looked over the Lessons appointed for today and in particular the portion 'Song of Isaiah' appointed for use instead of a Psalm, I was struck by the words:

God is my salvation

God is my strength.

That set me thinking, 'What picture do I have of God?'

For the values we adopt as a faith community are very much determined by our understanding of the God in whom we believe. Looking back over the very varied places I have served in my time in ministry, I have seen a wide a wide range of Church communities both inside and outside the Church of Ireland. I would see a fairly strong correlation between a person's social and theological attitudes and their perception, their picture of God. A person with very judgemental attitudes towards others would generally have a fairly austere view of God. God as judge, the wrath of God would figure more strongly in their thinking than the love of God and God as one who welcomes the outcast. By the same token those with laissez faire attitudes on social and theological issues would not be as comfortable with the idea of God as holy and the sovereignty, the majesty of God.

As a casual exercise I put the words ‘God is’ into the search engine of my computer Bible. It was a fairly crude exercise but not withstanding that it was interesting to see what came up.

There was a very strong sense of God present with his people, of Covenant, of a God who is committed to his people. But alongside that there was also a very strong sense of God as wholly other, as holy, of the majesty of God and, yes, the judgement of God.

Approaching as we are the season of Advent and Christmas we are presented with another picture of God in the person of Christ. I often find myself reflecting on words of Bishop David Jenkins, who, when he was Bishop of Durham, got himself involved in a lot of controversy – on occasion it has to be said on the basis of tabloid misrepresentation of Bishop Jenkins’ statements. Speaking of the Incarnation he spoke of Jesus as ‘the face of God towards us’

Put that statement alongside the description of the Church as ‘The Body of Christ’, and our vocation to show Christ to the world in all that we are as individuals and as a community. If we stay with Bishop Jenkins’ descriptions of Jesus as ‘the face of God towards us’, it begs the question ‘what face of God am I showing to the world?’ This is where my core beliefs - what is my picture, what is my perception of God – will actually be reflected in the values we adopt as individuals and as a Christian community.

Again this can stay at a fairly nebulous level – it is good to explore a concrete example. In this regard, just a Jesus made some of his most telling points through story, through parable, literature and film can give us much food for thought. During the week I came across a story I first heard some thirty years ago. It comes from the start of Victor Hogo’s novel, ‘Les Miserables’

The story starts in 1815 in Digne. The peasant Jean Valjean has just been released from imprisonment in the Bagne of Toulon after nineteen years - five for stealing bread for his starving sister and her family, and fourteen more for numerous escape attempts. Upon being released, he is required to carry a yellow passport that marks him as a convict,

despite having already paid his debt to society by serving his time in jail. Rejected by innkeepers, who do not want to take in a convict, Valjean sleeps on the street. This makes him even angrier and more bitter. However, the benevolent Bishop Myriel, the Bishop of Digne, takes him in and gives him shelter. (*Film clip at 11:00*) In the middle of the night, he steals the bishop's silverware and runs. He is caught, but the bishop rescues him by claiming that the silverware was a gift and at that point gives him his two silver candlesticks as well, chastising him to the police for leaving in such a rush that he forgot these most valuable pieces. After the police have left the bishop then "reminds" him of the promise, which Valjean has no recollection of making, to use the silver to make an honest man of himself. In the film made of this story, as Jean Valjean stands before the Bishop totally confused by what the Bishop has done and why the he has done this the Bishop tells him, 'Jean Valjean I have redeemed you from evil and hatred and I have given you back to God.'

What are the values that are brought out in this story? What picture of God was presented by the Bishop in the garden that day? They are the values, are they not, of he who said to the woman taken in adultery, 'Go and sin no more.'; of he who prayed for those who crucified him, 'Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.'; of him who taught in the parable of the sheep and the goats:

I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.' *Matt 25:35*

Bishop David Jenkins spoke of Jesus as the 'face of God towards us'. What is my core picture, my fundamental understanding of God? That is what will lie at the heart of my values. As members of the Body of Christ, what face of God will we present to the world this coming week in our homes, our neighbourhood, our places of work and recreation?

I will just finish with the words of a prayer found near the body of a
dead child in Ravensbrook Concentration Camp 1945

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the sufferings they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering; our comradeship, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this; and when they come to judgement let all the fruits we have born be their forgiveness.

In that simple prayer I am taught that no one, no one is beyond the redemptive, transforming love of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we be empowered to be channels of that love in the world of today.