

"Gentlemen, we just don't know, do we?"

I can still see Rev Dr Freddy Vokes, Archbishop King's Professor of Divinity, who lectured me in New Testament and Church History, standing with a glint in his eye. We had tried to tie him down on some point of interpretation as he lectured us on St John's Gospel - he just looked back at us and said in his sing song English voice, "Gentlemen, we just don't know, do we?" For some of us that was quite infuriating. Questions had answers and answers were either right or they were wrong. I actually found it quite liberating as Freddy went on to say, "Sometimes the most honest thing I can say is 'I don't know'."

Another thought that came to me as I read our Gospel reading for this morning was the character Topol in the film "Fiddler on the Roof". He was a poor Jewish man living in Czarist Russia who had an ongoing dialogue with God as why he had been put on this earth as a poor man. At one point he asked "Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?" He used to think about the sort of things he could do if he was rich. One of the things he would be able to do would be to spend time at the synagogue, talking with the rabbis about his faith, asking questions, "questions that would cross a rabbi's eyes".

Many people came to Jesus with questions - there were questions that came from the heart, questions that represented a search for truth, for meaning in the face of suffering. Then there were the questions, such as we read of this morning, that were intended to entrap, or trip him up, questions "that would cross a rabbi's eyes".

I think it is worth reminding ourselves that Jesus discouraged speculation. On different occasions people, including the disciples, came to him with questions for which there was no answer. On more than one occasion he was asked when was the Father going to bring in the Kingdom, to which Jesus replied, "Not even the Son of Man knows". Jesus felt comfortable living with uncertainty in the context of his

total trust in God.

And yet we still feel we ought to know the answers to questions such as these - and that can slip over into an arrogance of thinking that we do know, that we do have the answers and that everyone else is wrong.

The apostle Paul, as he reflected on the mystery of Christian love, acknowledged the limitations of his own knowledge in his first letter to the Church at Corinth,

[9] For we know in part and we prophesy in part, [10] but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. [11] When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. [12] Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Cor. 13:9-12)

Before God all of us are able to see but dimly. Like Paul, all of us need to acknowledge the limitations and imperfection of our knowledge of God. The early theologians of the Church as they sought, in the light of Scripture, to understand the nature of God used the term incomprehensible. They used this term not in the sense that we cannot know him, rather that we cannot define him, describe him as we can aspects of his creation - he is beyond our understanding.

We know him as our creator, we encounter him in creation as we gaze in wonder at a night sky or sunset or stop to reflect on the amazing complexity and beauty of life in all its forms from the simplest of organisms to the wonder of our own bodies, the ability to hear, to smell, to taste, to see. My own spiritual pilgrimage began in a growing wonder at the beauty of this world and the underlying order that science reveals - from the smallest of particles that make up the atom to the enormity of the universe of which this earth is but a tiniest part. What am I in all of this? It was a question such as this that evoked from the Psalmist those lovely words that we find in Psalm 8

" When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,

3rd Sunday before Advent - 2004 - year C - morning service

the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?

The very posing of the question "What is man?", asked in the context of wonder, in itself leads us towards the answer. The admission that we do not know why God should bother with sinful man opens us up to the realisation that he does, opens our hearts to the significance of Jesus, his teaching, his death and resurrection and moves us to worship.

We began thinking about questions that were asked of Jesus. There were questions from the heart, questions seeking meaning and purpose and then there were questions that were simply designed to "cross a rabbi's eyes", to trip him up, to entrap him. Questions asked by people who though they knew all the answers. Their certainty arose from hearts that were closed, impervious to ideas other than their own. They had no conception of God outside their own definitions. We too can seek to restrict God to the limits of our own understanding, our own definitions. Jesus pointed them beyond a God of their own formulae to the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, God not of the dead but of the living. A God whom we not only worship but with whom we can engage.

I frequently thank God for Freddy Vokes and his simple yet profound observation, "Gentlemen, we just don't know, do we? Sometimes the most honest thing I can say is that I don't know."

It is as I confess that I don't know, that I don't have all the answers that my heart is opened to the God and Father of my Lord Jesus Christ and with Paul I confess in my heart, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Cor 13:9)