

TUESDAY COMMUNION

God revealed - in a baby!

Hymn: 109 (verses 1-3) Let earth and heaven combine

Reading: Acts 17. 16-34

Prayers:

I remember boarding a bus in a dusty Indian town at the start of my journey to Mysore. It was hot and there weren't many seats left and so I found myself sitting next to a Muslim gentleman.

He told me he was a trader in rice and, having finished his business and having had his lunch, was now returning home. As so often happens in India our conversation turned to religion.

He soon turned to the crux of what he saw as the great difference between Christianity and Islam. "You Christians," he told me believe in three Gods, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We Muslims believe in one God!"

I did my best to try and speak of how Christians believe in one God revealed in three different ways but my argument clearly failed to grip for he was soon breathing rhythmically with his eyes closed!

Paul too speaks of the one God to those who gathered in the debating halls of the Areopagus in Athens. Most of what he says would have been agreed upon by any of his Jewish critics and indeed by Christians, Jews and Muslims today.

He speaks about the one God whom we human beings can't confine to one place and who can't be represented by a golden statue. He doesn't depend on us but we depend on him.

Paul also hints at the freedom God gives us to seek for understanding as we ***"search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him."***

The point at which our Muslim and Jewish friends would part company with a Christian understanding of God is when Paul speaks about Jesus. In Luke's description of what Paul says at the Areopagus the figure of Jesus only appears at the end when he speaks of how God "has appointed a day on which the world will be" judged in righteousness" by a man he has appointed, a man who he has raised from the dead.

We glimpse here the offence which both those who are Jews and Muslims feel and which others would ridicule, that the eternal God is to be encountered in a human being.

Yet, what Christians call "the incarnation" is the belief that God has revealed himself in the weakness and vulnerability of human life.

John Betjeman wrote a poem which asks the question which is at the heart of our Christmas celebrations:

***The bells of waiting Advent ring,
The Tortoise stove is lit again
And lamp-oil light across the night
Has caught the streaks of winter rain.
In many a stained-glass window sheen
From Crimson Lake to Hooker's Green.***

***And girls in slacks remember Dad,
And oafish louts remember Mum,
And sleepless children's hearts are glad,
And Christmas morning bells say 'Come!'
Even to shining ones who dwell
Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.***

***And is it true? and is it true?
The most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?***

***And is it true? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissueed fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,***

***No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare -
That God was Man in Palestine
And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.***

It was a question which lay at the heart of what Paul said to the intelligentsia at the Arepagus.

It's both a question and an invitation to us, too!

Amen