

What's In It For Me Religion
17th Sunday, Year B
26 July 2009

As Christian missionaries worked their way across northern Europe during the dark ages they found that pagan Kings had a simple religious question for them – “Is your God more powerful and useful than our Gods when it comes to victory in battle, in making our crops grow, and in making our wives fertile?” Judging by the results of these evangelisation efforts it would appear that the answer to the question was sometimes yes.

People in the pagan world lived in what is called an integrated environment. When night came down they could hear the eerie sounds of the natural world all around them with nothing but the thin draughty walls of their hovels between them and this hair stand up on the back of your neck scary surrounds. They perceived the signatures of the Gods in the skies, and for them the happenings of their daily lives were filled with signs and omens of the God's intentions for them.

It is all rather different for us living as we do in a mediated environment with several layers of protection between the natural world and us. We travel from place to place in tin boxes on rubber wheels. We spend most our days and nights in artificially lit, insulated rooms with machines heating us, or cooling us. In fact we live at such a remove from the smells and microscopic seeds of nature that many of us have developed allergies. Our immune systems have to readjust to such an ultra cleaned and screened living space. This new way of living is part of the reason why some of our contemporaries have lost their sense of wonder at

the mystery at the heart of the world that we call God.

Yet it is a timeless phenomena that when human beings start getting interested in God, and want to develop a relationship with the ground, source and goal of all that is, their overtures are often full of personal requests. Please fix this relationship, save me from getting the sack, make my business succeed. Or we make bargains with God – if this lotto ticket comes in I'll give most of it away to family, friends and charities. And there are the desperate, heart breaking petitions – please save my child from the effects of this terrible accident, let me beat the rap on this cancer diagnosis I have just been given, let my terminally ill parent die peacefully, without pain, and soon.

God so longs to give himself to us that he takes all of this seriously. He always takes us on an as is where is basis, and works from the situation we present to him. Indeed the teaching of Jesus on prayer starts with the assumption that asking and requesting is at the very heart of this relationship building activity. But at its essence prayer is a relationship development activity, and if our default position is to always have our hand out to get our personal agendas satisfied, then some rather odd things will start to happen in this relationship.

Tiberias was a new city founded by rich merchants on the shores of the lake of Galilee. The poor flocked in to it in search of employment, despite the fact that this new development was built over a big graveyard, something anathema to Jews, and thus making its inhabitants ritually unclean in the eyes of Torah observant believers. So the vast crowd that pursues Jesus into the countryside are both

distanced from their own religious tradition, and are spiritually as well as physically famished. They have been impressed by his success in curing the sick, and they want more of these miraculous signs.

We have been told earlier in John's gospel that Jesus is suspicious of people whose religious quest is based on an appetite for signs. This morning we find out why. No sooner has the miraculous feeding of the crowd taken place than they set about hauling off the source of this bountiful provender, and making him the local ruler so that he can keep doing it for them forever.

Ironies abound in this tale of bountiful food in the wilderness. Roman Emperors kept the restless mob happy and politically inactive with bread and circuses. The Jewish people had been miraculously fed with manna in the wilderness during their formation period to stop them moaning about how good things had been in Egypt, and to teach them to rely on God. But that hadn't stopped them starting on their favourite religious activity – making idols that reflected their own greedy, acquisitive, fearful natures, whose job it would be to keep the good things of this life coming.

And that is what has happened here. Instead of giving praise to the God of Israel who has once again blessed his people in their wilderness journey they set about bending a local miracle worker to their will. These people live in such a selfish and skewed religious culture that they can only conceive of a God who is as small as the source of continual handouts for their benefit. So Jesus escapes from them in just the same way that God will always slip away from us whenever we try to turn him into our spiritual servant.

How then should we pray when the need is great, or when calamity strikes? Jonathan Edwards was a Puritan Divine in the early days of the American colonies. He is honoured now as America's first and greatest theologian. That was a perspective that not too many of his contemporaries had. In fact he got the sack from the town of Northampton's premier pulpit for refusing to preach a gospel that was tailored to the bourgeois tastes of the town's leading citizens. The only other job he would receive before his premature death was as a missionary to the Indians. Turning to God in prayer when he got the push in Northampton he asked first of all that his wife and children would be protected from the consequences of his unemployment, and then he requested that whatever happened to him next would be to the glory of God and to the advancement of his purposes, and that he find the grace to accept that outcome be it for personal good or ill.

These last few weeks I have been turning over in my mind what the Canadian Joseph Mangina wrote about that great theologian of the 20th century Karl Barth:

Barth seemed to take special delight in the classical doctrines concerning God's being and attributes. Perhaps this is because these doctrines underscore the fact that God is fascinating and compelling for his own sake. God is of interest to us not because he is useful to us, but because God is supremely good and true and indeed beautiful.

I believe that too. We are going to spend all eternity contemplating the Divine being of God with holy joy, and we might as well start now. That is why we have come to church this morning. This is what is at the heart of true religion – and it is miles away

from the gimmee, gimmee, gimmee attitude of those
Tiberian picnickers in the Galilean wilderness.