

*Reflections on Faith and Atheism – a Homily preached at Evensong, Pentecost 21 - 13.10.13.  
at Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle by Stephen Williams*

Last Sunday we were treated to very fine preaching by Bishop Graeme Rutherford, whose focus was on the dialogue between atheism and faith, made very real to him by his ongoing dialogue with his son Jonathan, and sharpened by their shared authoring of the book *Beloved Father, Beloved Son*. On Tuesday evening Bishop Graeme talked about the book at the Cathedral Evening Group. While the topic is still fresh in our minds, and Bishop Graeme's fine treatment of it is still in the air around us, I thought it may be useful tonight to follow that up with a few further reflections on faith and atheism.

We tend to think of atheism as anti-faith and anti-God, which it can be. Most often, however atheism is just what the word itself says it is – it means 'not god', with a small 'g'. That is, in seeking an account of how things are, the account doesn't include a divine, supernatural element or being. It doesn't mean 'anti God'. It means that in the atheist mind there is no such category, though atheists usually profess themselves open to persuasion about this, so long as the persuasion is through philosophical and scientific discourse.

In the household of faith, of course, that is precisely what we are. We are people who live by faith and not just by sight, including scientific sight. God gave us our senses and our minds so that we can learn from observation, and it would be an insult to God to believe what is contrary to reason. But faith in God, even if not derived from reason, is not opposed to reason, and that's part of our dialogue when we talk with atheists. Indeed, if we COULD prove God, if we could somehow do a series of experiments that demonstrate the things that belong to faith, it would not be faith at all, but something else. Faith that could see and touch God in a scientific sense would not be faith but something else.

The resurrection of Jesus, faith that Christ is victoriously alive, belongs in the realm of faith, not sight. The gospel and Pauline witness to the many appearances of the risen Lord attest to this. The appearances of Jesus are ambiguous. Even the disciples don't immediately recognise the risen Lord. Mary thinks he's the gardener. On the road to Emmaus, two disciples walk all the way with Jesus without knowing who he is until he breaks bread for them. Thomas, famously, refuses to believe, even though he's in a room full of people who believe that Jesus is there. After Thomas is invited to reach out to touch Jesus, however, something happens to Thomas. He is gifted with faith and says "My Lord and my God!" He doesn't TOUCH Jesus, remember. The faith recognition is happening on some level other than touch and sight. Paul had to go on retreat after the Damascus Road experience to try and integrate, then find words to describe his coming to faith in the risen Lord.

The New Testament witness to the risen Lord resonates with us, for whom God is not (and cannot be) an object, a 'thing' we believe in, but is always revealed in an ongoing relational event.

God doesn't set it up for us that we MUST have faith. Faith is a gift freely given and freely received. Faith we HAVE to have wouldn't be faith.

It is in the nature of God to be reticent and not forceful or manipulative, to be gracious and not bullying, to be attractive but not demanding. There is no duress in faith.

And if my mind COULD somehow get itself around the immensity of God, my belief wouldn't be in God at all, but in something less than God.

When you hear people talking about God as if they have comprehended God, it is a sure sign that they are talking, not about God, but an idol of their own creation.

That's what an idol is, isn't it. It's the IDEA that we believe in as if it were God.

Indeed, there's a kind of atheism that's appropriate to the faith journey.

I need to keep rejecting the god I believe in, in order to discover more about the true and living God. I need courage to let go of the god I imagine, in order to discover the God beyond my imagining.

We are very fortunate as Anglicans that we are not what they call a 'confessional' church. There isn't a long set of propositions that we HAVE to believe about God.

Those propositions are always locked into the language of the decade in which they are written, and limit ways in which we can explore and enjoy God. Creedal statements are historical bookmarks in the story of faith. They are not an attempt to circumscribe the character of the God of faith.

If you want to know what Anglicans believe, you have to look at our worship.

The Latin tag to describe the Anglican way is: *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*. 'The way we worship is the way we believe.'

Our words to describe God are not definitions. God is beyond definitions.

Our words to describe God are not definitions but words for prayer, praise and proclamation - they are to enable the worship of the living God. They are sacred poetry rather than attempts to limit our ideas for God.

Our worship is entirely composed of, or derived from the sacred Scriptures. As Fr Mark so eloquently told us this morning, the Scriptures are not some kind of divine mental straight-jacket. They are our chief resource for faith-filled proclamation. Only when we see them that way will they come to life and open us to faith in the Living God.

We are created to give glory to God, and worship is the highest expression of our humanity.

The beauty of worship is not incidental, for it affirms God's reality and character, and releases the best from us towards God and towards others. Flawed humanity is in this space (worship) caught up in the goodness of God. The 'goodness' of the worship event is much greater than any 'goodness' we can bring to it.

The beauty of worship can be simple, or elaborately magnificent. Either way, the beauty of worship affirms God's reality and character in a way that words never can.

*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi.* 'The way we worship is the way we believe' in order that the way we worship can be the way that we live, and the way that we are becoming.