

WORSHIP 7 February 2021

Welcome & Introduction

Welcome to our pastorate worship. In this time of worship I would like us to consider what we think when we hear the word “God.” God is central to our faith but what do we have in mind when we hear or pronounce the word “God?” There are two (and possibly more) understandings of God in the Christian tradition that are very different but coexist. The first understanding we find in the opening hymn “Immortal, Invisible, God only wise.” Let us sing, listen to or remember the words of the hymn.....

Hymn

Immortal, invisible God only wise

Introduction cont’d

God is immortal, invisible, almighty and all knowing. God who dwells in heaven, who created the world and rules over all creation. This is an understanding that is found in many (or most) of our hymns; it is the common meaning for God found in our dictionaries and shapes the understanding of many of us Christians as well as agnostics and atheists.

But then there is the second understanding of God which we find in a few hymns in which God is not referred to as being far removed, looking down on his (always his) creation but instead is very much a presence, a divine presence all around us, with us and in us. In this understanding God is not a being up there, “in heaven,” but right here, as well as more than “right here.” This understanding can be found in the hymn “O God you search me and you know me.”

Hymn

O God, you search me and you know me

Introduction cont’d

According to the first understanding God is a God who is far removed and who occasionally intervenes in the world to realize God’s purposes. According to the second understanding God does not intervene but interacts; God is present and there is interaction between divine purpose and human action. What do you think? What do you believe? One or the other, or perhaps both?

Prayer

O God, immortal, invisible, yet so close to us, calling us to worship. For your presence with us, and your promises to us, we thank and praise you. For opportunities to worship you freely, if not in church then at home, to serve you generously and to think and question intelligently, we thank you. O God, for the good news in the story and in the heart, for the insights we receive from you living word, for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for the love and grace that reaches out to all people, we thank and praise you.....Amen

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 40: 21-31 & Mark 1: 29-39

Reflection

God transcendent? God immanent? What do you think? What do you believe? In our reading of Isaiah we see that the biblical understanding is that God is both transcendent, beyond the universe, and at the same time immanent, a presence everywhere in the universe and deeply involved in people's lives. And in the reading of Mark we see the interaction between the divine purpose and human action – God present and at work among the faint and weary. And this understanding of God, present with us, involved in our lives, in partnership with us to realize a future whose shape is yet to be determined, that is an understanding that makes sense to me rather than God high up in heaven, however much we may sing of this almighty God ruling in might.

In Isaiah chapter 40 the prophet is challenging a people who have given up hope that God is with them and among them. It is already quite a while since Israel had been invaded by Babylon and its town elites had been taken into exile. A generation has already gone through the bitter experience of exile. The children of the first exiled people are growing old. They are giving up hope. So it is that the prophet Isaiah begins by reminding them of what they have known and believed. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?"

At the start of his vision the picture Isaiah offers of God is one the people of Israel would have recognized in the religious belief and propaganda of their captors, their overlords.....God as an oriental despot who dwells above the circle of the earth and who stretches out the heavens like a curtain; a God who causes rulers and nations to rise

and to fall; a God who takes life, as easily as giving it. This God is, of course, no stranger to us. It is the God of traditional religion, of traditional Christian faith. But Isaiah, however, is not satisfied with this vision and neither are those who are languishing in exile, nor anyone who knows tragedy and suffering would ever really be satisfied with this vision. Rather, Isaiah takes God off an oriental throne and brings God down to earth and begins to redefine what we mean when we talk of God's almightiness. Because God is great in strength and mighty in power, Isaiah says, "not one is missing." *Have you now known? Have you not heard?.....He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.* In these prophetic words of Isaiah almightiness is not measured by preordained divine planning, or by being the strongest God in the universe, but almightiness is measured by God reaching out in love to the least of the earth, those who are faint and weary, those who are ready to give up hope. This is a God not of the conqueror but of the conquered, a God not of the mighty and triumphant but of the marginalized and the exiled. This is a God who is not up in heaven somewhere, removed and detached, issuing heavenly decrees, but a God in the midst of creation, in our midst, alongside us, breathing hope in our tired lives, cheering us on, planning and working with us in what may seem the most trivial details of our lives. When Isaiah asks, "*Have you not known? Have you not heard?*" he raises the questions to invite his listeners to discover that they are not alone and that God is with them.

In the reading from Mark's gospel we again see God at work, far from the predictable script of religious piety. Mark shows us Jesus, far from the temple, far from the places where God is worshiped as a transcendent God seated in heaven arranging a certain kind of social, political and economic order which suits those who have power.

Mark's Jesus goes around the countryside and as he wanders from place to place it is amongst "the least" in society that he lives, teaches and heals... among the sick, the demon possessed, the outcast. Just like in the vision of Isaiah, here again divine power is not measured in strength; almightiness is not imagined as God's ability to "rule from on high" No, the strength of God's power is that "no one will be lost, not a single one." In this time and age, with its enormous challenges, thinking of

God up in heaven, far removed, directing the affairs of the world just does not make sense. We need God much closer to us, involved in our struggles, present in all the possibilities for healing, change and renewal in our society, in the world....

What do you think? What do you believe? Amen.

Prayers & Lord's Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we thank you for all the good news that we have heard and witnessed over the past week. Good things are happening; good people are bringing hope in these difficult times. Yet many are struggling and we join in prayer to remember them. We pray for all who are wrestling with doubts and fears, who feel hopeless, who are worn down by worries and the burdens they carry. We pray for calmness, courage, strength and, most of all, that they may know your presence and love through the people that support and care for them. There are those we know and love who are faint and weary and we pray that you would surround them with your healing presence and that they may find their spirits lifted. Grant wisdom to those whose lives have turned upside down and need guidance and direction. Grant hope to those who despair, and friendship to those who feel lonely. May we know your love that you have for each one and may that love inspire and help us live out that love with courage, compassion and creativity. We pray, continue to show us how we can reach out to share goodness and kindness in these very challenging times and how we can prepare for a bright future. We pray together.....OUR FATHER

Offering

When we give joyfully, when time and talents are shared freely, when the hurt of the world is taken seriously, when the church responds caringly, then, we believe, your blessing, loving and gracious God, will be received abundantly. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Hymn

Guide me, o thou great Jehovah

Blessing

God's blessing be yours and well may it keep you

Christ's blessing be yours and well may it guide you

The Spirit's blessing be yours and well may it comfort you

Now and ever more. Amen.