

Sermon: Searching for God

Readings: Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12
John 3:16-21

One or two of you will know that over this past week, I've been locked away on a theology conference. Now, before you think that's just an excuse for a bit of a jolly, I should point out that some work was involved - starting at 7.30 each morning and running on until 7.30 at night, alongside some very able clergy and wrestling with titles such as "Integralism and Gelasian Dyarchy" and sentences such as "From the Rahnerian version of integralism to an embracing of Bonhoeffer's dialectical paradoxes of secularization is an easy step...".

Now, that may not sound like your idea of an "easy step" and, to be quite honest, it was, pretty far removed from mine! Yet, having the opportunity to be immersed in the writings of philosophers and theologians of the past 2500 years, with little distraction, and an outstanding theologian to direct us, was quite a privilege. And the venue of

Windsor Castle, sitting in the stalls of the *Order of the Garter* for Matins and Evensong and walking over the tombs of Kings and Queens of England each day, was something that I'll remember for quite some time.

The focus for the week was broadly one of "Christian Doctrine" – the foundational beliefs that have shaped the church and which continue to be debated and refined – but, in particular, at how we understand "being human" and how this might help or hinder our search for God. We considered how the philosophy of Greek thought, particularly flowing from Plato and Aristotle, has been utilised by Christian theologians ranging from Augustine and Aquinas, through to those who have fed the modern debate, such as DeLubac and Brown. There was a huge amount to take in, and I won't pretend that I grasped every part of it, but what emerged was a picture of our innate longing for God and of the ways in which God invites us into relationship with Him/Her(!)

Inevitably, different church backgrounds, personal sensitivities and academic interests presented a host of filters through which each attendee viewed the topics for debate and, again perhaps inevitably, this led to the odd expression of frustration and irritation. However, seeing how others view questions of faith and the various challenges of our age, is clearly an important exercise if we are going to have any chance of working together and aspiring to present a united vision of the body of Christ.

So how does God invite us to move towards Him and what might that look like? For Plato & Augustine, there is a sense of the soul longing for union with God. This is part of our nature, part of how we were made, and God calls us to direct our will to His. For Aristotle and Aquinas, the fullness of our being is found in God - what Aristotle refers to as “eudaimonia” or a state of human flourishing, and what Aquinas refers to as union with the Beatific Vision.

However, for both St Augustine and St Aquinas, we are fallen beings and require an outworking of God’s Grace if we are to move towards the fulfilment of our nature in relationship with Him.

More recent developments in Christian thinking on Grace have suggested that we may be able to locate it in all sorts of unexpected ways – in popular culture and even in some areas that were previously considered to be distinctly unholy! And some thinkers are keen to move away from the term “Grace” entirely, believing that it is a loaded term that doesn’t speak sufficiently of the overflowing love of God for creation and, perhaps inevitably, creates complications around whether we are free or not to respond to God’s calling.

Such contributions can prompt us to consider our own responses to difficult theological questions – what is a human being? Are we born with an inbuilt idea of God? Does God move us towards Him, or remain at a distance such that we must search for Him? Is God “He” or “She” or neither?!

What does it mean to be made in God's image? And what if my image does not seem to be recognised by the Church or traditional theology? Do we need to rethink our theology to take into account issues of gender, sexuality, and ever more fluid references to identity? Or is it the case that confidence in the idea that simply "God is love" is enough?

Well, if the past week has taught me anything, then the answer to most of these questions is both "yes" and "no"! As humans, we are inevitably limited in the degree to which we can work out these things for ourselves and if we are to understand anything of lasting value, then we must realise that we cannot do so without God.

My instinct, is one that tends to be drawn to the simple rather than the complex – though it may not have sounded like that so far! I do think that we can overcomplicate a simple Christian message of love, but I also recognise that the terms "God" and

"love" can be a little abstract and hard to express in ways that all can relate to.

And that is why the figure of Christ is so vital! Without Jesus, we would have little to refer to when searching for an understanding of what God's love looks like, but with Jesus, we have a rich resource, pointing us to our true identity and to the fulfilment of God's will for each of us.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we hear that Jesus is "the reflection of God's glory" and the "exact imprint of God's very being." For a short while, God dwelt among us, coming down to be as us – to be "a little lower than the angels". This is what John the evangelist refers to as "light coming into the world". Through Jesus, the way of life, eternal life, complete union with the Father, is illuminated and clear for all to see.

There are many questions that remain about our nature and God's nature and, as long as we are human, there will always be questions about such things. But, if we have the example of Jesus, and if

we trust that the Son leads to the Father, and if we believe that we are made in the image of the Father, and that this image is the fulfilment of all things, then we will find that answering such questions is not essential to our faith or our future.

A phrase that was referenced more than once in my week away is “We are made in the image of God and called into the likeness of Jesus”... (*repeat*).

As the quotes in our *thoughts for the week* observe, this is a likeness beyond all others – it is closest that we can ever get to seeing image of God in action and it is one that has inspired billions of followers.

Napoleon quote?

I pray that we will all be able to delight in this truth and that in seeking to resemble the likeness of Jesus, we would both flourish as children of God and be a blessing to those who are searching for the light.

Let us pray...