

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 25th August 2019
Trinity 10 YrC proper 16

Ought not this daughter of Abraham be set free?

The readings we have had from the lectionary over the past few weeks have been exploring faith and how we engage with God. A couple of weeks ago the readings encouraged us to reflect on the place of God in our lives and how that affects the way we live and encounter the world. Last week we were encouraged to look at the way faith presents us with a different world view from that of the world. We talked about the tension between the Christian world view of life, death and resurrection and the organic and open view of existence.

Today we are taken further with important questions of how we understand God's action and place in the world.

Many years ago we visited Universal Studios, Los Angeles. It was a brilliant day riding on carts through film sets and being part of some of the special effects. You may remember a film Backdraft; it was rather big at the time. theme park had a exhibition all dedicated to how the film company achieved what for then were pretty impressive effects. As part of the show we entered a warehouse. Standing on a gantry, the guide explained how the set was used in the film, then without warning oil drums exploded, flames shot in our direction and the gantry we were stood on made to collapse. For a moment we were quite frightened, then we realised it was a special effect. Everything returned to normal and we left, uninjured. I shall never forget the explosive heat, the noise of oil cans flying through the air and the sensation of the world collapsing around me. "Golly," said one of our fellow participants, "that was just like the second coming!" A bit like the coming of the Lord.

The engagement with God is often presented in such dramatic ways. In the Old Testament, God follows his people through the wilderness as a pillar of fire and smoke. On the holy mountain a great cloud is said to have descended as God appeared and when Moses returned to the people with his face shining with the glory of God. on other occasions the appearance or actions of God are described in glorious technicolour. I wonder then how we expect God to appear to us; how do we understand God's engagement with us and the world? Are we often disappointed?

Today's passages present us with a different view of our engagement with God and how God relates to God's people. Isaiah presents God as one who engages

with us, “You shall call and the Lord will answer” all God asks is that we are faithful to God’s ways. The passage reads as a conditional response; if you do this, if you do that. However, is this not a realisation that God will respond to the needs of his faithful people.

The next question is how will God respond? Hebrews outlines the counter cultural context of God’s engagement with the community. We are challenged by the writer to the Hebrews, “you have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet”. Under the new covenant presented by Jesus we have a new engagement with God. No longer should we expect measurable data or dramatic public events. For the Lord whom we follow presents a relationship that is personal and engaging. We are used to engaging the world through our five senses. If we accept that the way of God is not the way of the world then we should be aware that God’s place in the world is not governed by our expectations and normality. We spoke last week of the non-binary revelations where for God existence is more than a black and white, good or bad scenario.

What then should we expect from God? Today’s Gospel is fascinating in that the synagogue leader doesn’t question the healing event itself but the fact that through his actions Jesus broke the law, the Torah that forbids work on the sabbath. Personally I would have been amazed at the healing miracle. Is this then a regular occurrence or is the gospel writing pointing to something else? I wonder if this is actually a parable of the place of God’s actions in the world over the Torah. The Torah was supposed to be there to reveal the works of God and it has become a yoke, a burden that restricts the life of the people and their engagement with God.

It is through love God acts amongst us. here love supplants rules. Jesus doesn’t say he hasn’t broken the law. He just says this woman needed help and through the power of God he was able to give it. Admittedly it was through a miraculous act that God’s love was revealed in that synagogue. It is the juxtaposition between the act of God and the Torah that reveals a tension in the world’s interpretation of God’s work in the world.

Isaiah tells us God is listening and will act if we follow his way. Hebrews is telling us the way of God is not the way of empirical human thinking. Jesus tells us to see God’s action in the world and response to our needs in and through love – love that can bring miracles; that the way of God is to love our neighbours as ourselves.