

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
LENT 5, 2005
OLD TESTAMENT BASICS (5)

ON OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

We're on the last lap now! What I want to attempt this morning is a dip into some – only some – of what you might call the theological themes of the Old Testament, themes that I think that are carried into Christianity and that anyone who takes their faith seriously is going to wrestle with in one way or another. The range of things I could speak about is vast, but I've chosen only a few. There are three very broad headings: God, Humanity, God and Humanity.

God

On the whole the Israelites did not speculate about God, they experienced God. They did not develop an abstract, philosophical discourse about God, but rather, out of their encounter with God spoke of God in dynamic, personal terms.

Above all, the Israelites experienced and celebrated God as the One who saved them from slavery in Egypt through the Exodus, the wanderings in the wilderness and the entry into the Promised Land. God saved them and constituted them his community. A good example of this is Exodus 3.7-10, God speaking to Moses out of the burning bush: *Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen*

how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." The only life they could have was life with God – their worship, their law, their prophets, their wisdom, their story were all about the struggle between God and Israel to sustain and ultimately to perfect that life together.

The God who struggles to keep Israel his people emerges as one who is wholly other, totally unlike any of his creatures. In Exodus 3.14, also in the story of God in the burning bush, we find that Moses said to God, *"If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"* God said to Moses, *"I AM WHO I AM."* He said further, *"Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"* Perhaps here God names himself as the One who absolutely is without any origin or cause; but also God names himself as the One who causes everything to be, who brings into being whatever comes into being, Creator and Sustainer of all that is. The Old Testament never identifies God with his creatures or the creation - *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts* (Isaiah 55.8-9) - nor while it ascribes many human characteristics to God, does it ever include among these sexuality, which it was common to ascribe to gods in the surrounding culture, nor does it ever permit depictions of God, nor does it permit the worship of other gods or allow them any reality. The technical terms for all of this is *transcendence* – God is wholly other.

But this isn't the whole story. In the very first talk in this series I said this: *as soon as I speak of the God of the Old Testament as mysterious and wholly other (think about Mount Sinai and the giving of the Commandments for example) I must also say that nobody could accuse the Old Testament of making God remote, or bloodless, or unconnected with human experience – the problem is that sometimes God looks almost too*

uncannily and unpleasantly human! It is one of the paradoxes of the Old Testament that while God is wholly other, God is frequently spoken of in very human terms. God may not be depicted, but he may be verbally imaged. One scholar has said that the Old Testament accepts *the risk of humanizing God in order that the danger of thinking of him as an abstraction or an impersonal force may be avoided.* So, the God who is wholly other is said to have a countenance, eyes, ears, mouth, nostrils, hands and feet. God speaks, hears, smells, laughs, hisses, whistles, strikes, writes, walks. God feels delight, joy, anger, hatred, love, disgust, regret, compassion. There are limits to this, of course - *God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?* (Numbers 23.19); *I am God and no mortal* (Hosea 11.9). But the use of this language enforces upon us a living, active, personal God who is personally engaged with his people, revealing himself to them, trying to direct them and overcome their sin and faithlessness. It is because of this that Hosea adds to the verse I have just quoted *I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.* The Holy One in your midst. God is what we call *immanent* as well as transcendent, wholly other than us, yet wholly engaged with us, God saving a people, calling out prophets, speaking his Word, conferring wisdom, making moral demands, judging and restoring.

Now, while Christianity has been much more willing than the Israelites to speculate about God and to use philosophy, especially Greek philosophy, to do this, our doctrine of God still exhibits, as it most certainly should, this fundamental pattern established in the Old Testament witness. For us, I suppose, the equivalent of Hosea's *Holy One in your midst* is St John's *The Word became flesh.* The best Christmas hymns capture this best: *Hark, hark, the wise eternal Word, Like a weak infant cries! In form of servant is the Lord, And God in cradle lies.* You might say that Incarnation

make sense of the OT witness and develops revelation to a much deeper level.

Enough of God!! What about humanity in the Old Testament? Well, there is paradox or at least tension here too. At the very beginning of the Old Testament, in the creation stories of Genesis, there is an affirmation of human dignity - *Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."* And we should recall that a few verses later it says *God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.* In the other story God makes a lovely garden for human beings to live in and the sense is that human beings are dignified by their relation to God.

Now, image of God has a long history in Christian theology and it is fundamental to much Anglican and catholic social teaching on the dignity of the human person. In the Old Testament it is related to the idea of dominion over other creatures – humans are above them because they share, to some extent, in God's dominion. Psalm 8 expresses this very clearly: *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.* Nowadays we are pretty suspicious of this kind of thinking as dominion so easily veers into exploitation and abuse. And anyhow, other ideas

about the nature of the image have been prominent in theology – the capacity to love and relate or the ability to reason, for example. But the point I want to make here is that this conferring of God’s image on human beings surely implies that human beings are uniquely endowed with a capacity to reflect God and his good purposes in the creation, at least that part of it we inhabit. There may very well be other people elsewhere in the universe made in God’s image. Indeed, I rather expect and certainly hope that there are. The place of human beings in the scheme of things is very much a live issue in our own day. The Old Testament has played, and continues to play, a large part in Christian response.

All the more tragic, then, is the other main plank of the Old Testament view of humanity – sin and moral failure, variously depicted as a missing of the mark, a distorted condition of life, a rebellion against God, a violation of the rights of God and others, a breach of the relation between God and his people, infidelity. This is above all masterfully laid out in the myth of the Garden of Eden, but it permeates the whole body of OT writings. *Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips* says Isaiah; *there is no one who does not sin*, so 1 Kings 8.46; *can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?* asks Job 4.17. The human heart is a mystery but it is the seat of evil inclinations: *The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually* (Genesis 6.5). So, God intends humankind to live in fellowship with God and to reflect God in the creation, but life is not like that and the OT makes no bones about it. This again, of course, remains of profound importance in Christian faith and theology – the whole idea of atonement rests on some such understanding, as does the notion of repentance and conversion, both of which are also fundamental to the OT discussion of forgiveness – humble yourself, return to the Lord your God, seek good and hate evil. In agreement with

the Old Testament Christianity assumes that God and humankind *need* to be brought closer together, that somehow or other they are too far *apart* from each other, or in some versions even *divided* from one another, or *separated* from one another. One way or another it does *not* think that all is well with us and our world and it does *not* think it is in our own power to change things.

This brings us to my last theme, God and Humanity. I quoted Isaiah a few moments ago: *And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; But the passage goes on: yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out. "* Or we might take Psalm 130: *If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.* Sin is not the last word, nor even is judgement for in the OT judgement is often mixed with warning, with the possibility of repentance, and Israel itself understood the trauma of the Exile as a kind of purifying judgement which demonstrated not only the holiness of God and his utter rejection of sin and evil, but also his steadfast love for his wayward people, expressed in the promise of presence during the Exile and of return. And, in the end, it is God's faithfulness to his people, his steadfast love for them, his compassion, that come through. It is true that God's anger is very clear in the OT, indeed it is more frequent than human anger, and, at its best as it were, it is rooted in his holiness and righteousness, but it is not his habitual attitude. Verses like the following depict God's basic stance, God's forgiving character : *Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.* (Psalm 30.6). *Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for*

your goodness' sake, O LORD! Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. (Psalm 25.7) The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3.22) and although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love (Lamentations 3.32). So, I suppose we could extrapolate from this trajectory in the OT a conviction that our hope as believers and indeed the hope of the whole human race lies in the faithfulness of God. You do get the sense in the unfolding of the OT story, though there are times when it looks as if God's patience has indeed run out with Israel or even with the whole lot of us, that God never quite gets to that point, but somehow just keeps going, keeps taking big hits, keeps trying to recall us to our senses - *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* In a way you might think this is almost the most precious insight the OT has to offer to us. It did of course, form the basis of messianic hopes and of ideas of resurrection late in the Old Testament and inter-testamental periods, both of which are mega expressions of God's faithfulness, but it also undergirds our fundamental conviction that human folly and sin are not the defining marks of Israel's story or of ours, but rather the faithfulness of God. And does that not bring us pretty close to Holy Week and Easter, to cross and resurrection?