

**Sermon**

Sunday 7 March 2021

Lesson

Exodus 20: 1 – 7

In his TED Talk on education and creativity, Ken Robinson tells the story of a little girl in a drawing lesson at school. She was seated at the back of the classroom. The teacher looked at her drawing and asked, ‘What are you drawing?’ The girl replied, ‘I’m drawing a picture of God’. The teacher said, ‘But nobody knows what God looks like’. The girl replied, ‘They will in a minute’. Robinson’s educational point is that children will take a chance: creativity is only possible when people are not frightened of being wrong. What did the little girl draw? What would you draw? What lines, shapes, images and colours would you use, if any?

We may choose visual images to portray God or we may prefer values or qualities. In Islam, two of the core qualities or characteristics of God are mercy and compassion. Allah is described as ‘Merciful’ and ‘Compassionate’. There is no doctrine of original sin and no need for an atoning sacrifice. On the Day of Judgement, everyone is

accountable to God for their own actions. Salvation comes through one's total surrender to God: total surrender is what the word 'Muslim' means. What qualities or characteristics would you use to describe God?

In mystical traditions across the world, including within the mystical tradition of Christianity, there is an emphasis on the unknowability of God. God is the ineffable, unnameable, Mystery: the indiscernible Breath of Life. When God first 'spoke' to Abraham, God said, '*Lech Lecha*': 'Go to yourself'. The faith of Jews, Christians and Muslims is rooted in that first spiritual encounter: a call to self-realisation.

Some people prefer to use the word 'God', while others may prefer the 'True Self' or perhaps 'the still, small voice'. What names of God speak most meaningfully to you? If one thinks of God in terms of our inner journey, how might we depict that with lines, shapes, colours or sounds?

In our lesson today we listened again to the opening verses of Exodus 20 which contain the first of the Ten Commandments. In Judaism,

the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, are known as the Ten Words. God said to Moses:

You must have no other god besides Me.  
You must not make a carved image for yourself,  
nor likeness of anything in the heavens above,  
or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.

Taken together, the heavens, the earth and beneath the sea represented the entire cosmos; all three realms of existence. God commanded that the Hebrew people must not bow down before an image of any created thing. Artistic images were permissible but not as objects of worship, not as religious idols. In the twenty-first century we are not likely to bow down before any hand-carved image of a lion, tree or disc of the sun.

However, idolatry is a biblical metaphor. Idolatry means clinging to certainty, fixating on the past and attempting to control everything (including God). In the Bible, to carve an image meant, in effect, that the carpenter or sculptor had defined the image: he or she had given the image shape, limited and controlled it, and made it unchanging. There is a joke in Judaism that, 'One day a leopard

stalked into a synagogue, roaming and lashing its tail. Three weeks later, it had become part of the liturgy!’ One rabbi says, ‘I want to remain free to chase wild leopards!’

From the earliest days of the Hebrew Bible, at the very foundation of the Scriptures that Jesus will have known by heart, is the freedom of God: in John’s Gospel, Jesus taught Nicodemus, ‘The wind blows where it will’, and that is how we are to think about God. Every definition of God leads to heresy; every definition is spiritual idolatry. Etched on blue stone by ‘the finger of God’, the Ten Commandments open with the claim that Truth cannot be pinned down; tradition has not captured, entrapped, the Eternal; and, metaphorically speaking, God is the wind or the wild leopard that will not be tamed.

Quite obviously, we have nothing but words, concepts, images, music and silence to express God, but the crucial point is that they are not God: not expression of God is God. We will have our preferred ways of speaking about God and to God, but they are personal rather than universal, relative rather than absolute. Take yourself to the

classroom to think creatively about God, and don't be afraid to correct your work again and again.

In a passing reflection about God, I found my thoughts drifting to this sanctuary: the beauty of the wood and the flowers, the dramatically colourful windows, the hushed and the crashing sounds of the organ, the red carpet and the oak cross. For me, God is an intuition, a feeling, an argument of the mind, and a spiritual companion.

Beneath the singing of any hymn, behind the reading of poetic Bible verses, and between the syllables of every word spoken prayer, there is a secret silence; a moment when the soul is intimate with the Silent God.

The Trappist monk, the late Thomas Merton, spoke of God within all things. Merton said:

Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God shows [God's Self] everywhere, in everything – in people and in things and in nature and

in events. It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without [God]. It's impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it.

How do you imagine the Immortal? What are the things that come to mind for you? It may be that many of the traditional images and doctrines speak most powerfully to you. It may be that you find greater spiritual comfort and fulfilment in other ways. The peace of a burning candle, a bracing walk or a meditation on the presence of Jesus may speak more directly to you. *Lech lecha*: go to yourself! What might you draw at your desk in the classroom of the mind?

Amen.