

Living resurrection faith
John's Gospel Chapter 10:22-30
Easter 4 Year C Chester Cathedral 25.4.10

The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ is Philip Pulman's title for his latest novel. The book has attracted a great deal of interest- has been reviewed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and is high on the bestseller lists. Pulman is a self-confessed atheist, and this book is another contribution to the God debate. One of the interesting things is how many books are being published and read about God, faith, religion- it seems to me that far from being a godless society we are in fact very much interested in questions of faith, and current research shows that the future for the world as a whole is going to be very religious.

But that raises the question, what kind of religion? Philip Pulman has written a story in which he imagines that Mary gave birth to twins- Jesus, a generous, radical visionary, and Christ, self-righteous, fearful, who wants a universe where magic and certainty hold sway, where we are protected from doubt. In Pulman's story, Christ realises that his brother's vision-Jesus's vision- will never come about- it's just too idealistic- it needs in effect, marketing- recording and manipulating the facts of Jesus's life and teaching; Christ believes that without miracles, without a church, without a scripture, the power of Jesus's words and deeds will be lost and so he is persuaded to betray his brother and then impersonate

him after his death- a fabricated resurrection leading to the establishment of the church. It's very clever and very powerful, not least because Pulman portrays a Jesus who has real spiritual authority, charismatic in the right sense of the word.

Pulman raises profound and necessary questions- about the nature of faith- what it might really mean to believe in Jesus and to follow him, and about the institution of the church- which predictably Pulman regards as a corrupt and self-seeking system.

In today's gospel the Jews demand certainty- 'If you are the Messiah, just tell us in words of one syllable.' Would it not be nice, and comfortable, and safe, if we knew without a shadow of a doubt; it is a common human craving, and the cry of many militant atheists today- 'you can't prove it, therefore it's not true.' But the craving for certainty leaves no room for faith, no space for God's grace to operate. There is a mystery, which I think St John is grappling with in this passage, about why some people believe and some don't. Faith is a step in the dark, a response to the grace of God revealed in our fragile lives, sometimes just a hint, but enough for us to risk seeking more. In the end faith is not about signing up to a system, but being prepared to join in a story, and allowing the Holy Spirit to lead us. It's risky, and most of us prefer certainty and safety. But if you take away mystery you deprive life of its richness and complexity- ultimately of its meaning- where would we be without music, art ,

poetry, great literature- life would be flattened out- like trying to live on only one level, whereas, in reality we all live on many levels at once.

Living on many levels we can exercise our intuition, our sense of beauty and awe, be open to the unexpected, to what is beyond what we thought or felt. It is dangerous to respond to the cry, 'prove it,' 'tell us plainly' - because it will draw us into trying to resolve mystery instead of living with and deepening it. God can not be explained without remainder- he is not a puzzle to be solved, and thinking we know is usually a sure sign that we don't.

We project onto God our own ideas, our own fantasies and power trips in order to contain God within a framework we understand and can deal with. It is only when we are prepared to let go of all our preconceived ideas, to acknowledge that we don't know, that we can be open to the reality of God. That's why there are two strands in Christian spirituality- the way of knowing and the way of not knowing- and we need both- because the minute we say 'God is like this...' we also have to say, 'God is not like this.' It is back to mystery, if you like- God is both more than and other than we can conceive.

Sadly, and this is where Philip Pulman has a powerful point, we do, like the Jews in John's gospel- keep God at a distance so that we can resist knowing the truth. St Mark tells us that when the women go to the tomb intent on anointing Jesus's dead body they are worried

about the problem of moving the stone from the entrance. Psychologically we have the same problem today- we proclaim the words 'Christ is risen' but maybe in our heart of hearts we don't really believe it- we believe, as did those women, that he is dead and a massive stone is blocking the way- preventing us from worshipping him as a holy relic. Religion can terribly easily become the cult of the dead body of Christ- we embalm our faith with rules and rituals and legalism, abstract concepts, and these take the place of a dynamic and radical faith in a living and risen Jesus. Jesus calls us to a way of life that is altogether too challenging, too life-changing. We want to believe without having our lives irrevocably disturbed- turned upside down. I think that maybe a problem for many of the more vehement, and outspoken atheists- they fear it just might be true and they don't want that.

To follow Pulman's story-line- we may find ourselves with Christ and against Jesus, settling too easily for the certainties of doctrine and dogma- 'religion' - instead of truth and life. Jesus calls us to radical conversion- to a depth of loving that can only change us- draw us into the life of God- the eternal life that Jesus gives- because he lives it himself- in union with the Father. 'I and the Father are one.'

We have all had experience of that 'oneness' - it is the experience of the baby with its mother- for the baby there is no reality outside of its mother, there is no 'other'.

The poet Wordsworth spoke of that oneness when he wrote:

Not in entire forgetfulness,
and not in utter nakedness,
but trailing clouds of glory do we come
from God who is our home.'

Our journey through life is to recover that oneness, which is the eternal life Jesus offers us. 'I give them eternal life and they will never perish.'

Jesus is not dead- he is risen and he calls us, he invites us, here and now, today, to a living dynamic faith- a faith that will make all the difference in the world- a faith that will energise us to refuse to accept the world as it is, but will see it with God's eyes- not cruel and hopeless but calling for love and transformation.

Another poet and priest, R S Thomas wrote:

I looked
at him, not with the eye
only, but with the whole
of my being, overflowing with
him as a chalice would
with the sea. *(Suddenly)*

We can live such a generous, all embracing, joyful faith. Once we open ourselves to that, there will be no need to be defensive about our faith, no need to moan that

we are not taken seriously. People turn to religion to find meaning and purpose- it is therefore a matter of the very greatest importance that we do not settle for a religion in the future which shows the same aggressive intolerance that many atheists currently show themselves whilst deploring it in people of faith. There is no need- because the Lord Jesus is not dead, he is risen and alive, living in us and inviting us to walk with him in the power of the resurrection.

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