

Along the track

Coming to Know God

I recently took some time to listen to two street preachers in a busy shopping centre. I admire their dedication and their courage. I couldn't do it! But what they had to say was so depressing – the words *abomination* and *vengeance* came up regularly and the picture of God they painted for anyone who cared to listen was, to say the least, a real turn off, an unforgiving and terrifying God, hell bent, as it were, on punishment and retribution. Where was the God of love, the God of forgiveness, compassion and mercy revealed to us by Jesus?

The basis of our faith, the essence of it is our relationship with God. Often that relationship is diminished by dreadful images of God, by a narrowness of vision, of arbitrariness, legalism, rigidity. So often we create an image of God as a person who looks and thinks and feels and acts just like us. We may even think of God as one with our own weaknesses - vengeance, anger, revenge, jealousy and so on. Sadly, many of the atrocities across the world today are being done in the name of God, or at least a very jaundiced view of God.

Jesus' preaching about His Father was so challenging to many of his listeners. They were not ready for the God of compassion and forgiveness, the God who invited all into friendship. We all need reminding of that:

By his revelation, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses us as friends, and moves among us, in order to invite us into his own company. CCC#142

On the other hand,

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because each person is created by God and for God: and God never ceases to draw each person to himself. Only in God will each person find the truth and happiness that they never stop searching for. CCC #27

Many of Jesus' listeners had fixed ideas, prejudices, an inability in many cases to look beyond their own ideas about who God should be and how God should act, about who God called and who were not, who God should forgive and who God ought to punish. Power and authority were vested in those who made the rules and ensured that they were kept to the letter of the law. Obedience was one thing but there wasn't much about them that promoted a lasting relationship with a loving and generous God.

Admittedly, our language about God will always fall short – God defies complete description: *Since our knowledge of God is limited, our language about him is equally so. We can name God only by taking creatures as our starting point, and in accordance with our limited human ways of knowing and thinking. CCC #40*

That did not stop us from trying. Doctrines and formulas were devised to help us describe the indescribable. But often they became more important than the reality they were trying to reveal and a literal adherence to those formulas assumed enormous importance, much more than was intended. God is much greater than a collection of words, no matter how thoughtful and thought provoking they may be.

What we do in the name of God should emerge from a healthy and generous view of a loving God, who for no other motive but 'the fullness of his love,' is quietly moving among us and addressing us as friends.

Anti-religion and anti-church feelings and atheism today are fed by some pretty awful theology and some less than generous practices. The God that many atheists write about is not the God I believe in either. Many people who no longer go to church have been hurt by those harsh practices and by very judgmental attitudes. Who they've met in their churches and what they have experienced don't speak well of God.

Our language about God, the way we speak about God, what we do in God's name ought always reflect this quiet and generous invitation into God's own company. #CCC142. God is not a coercive, overbearing, threatening presence. God calls people to discover their creator in the people around them, in the events of life and through the world around them (CCC#32). We also find God's invitation to friendship in the yearnings and questions of the heart - the desire for lasting happiness, freedom, inner peace and goodness, the desire to find meaning in life and purpose in suffering. God has not abandoned those who doubt or question in their search for meaning.

What words do you use to describe God?

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au