

Problem: Who or what is God in our time and place?

-When I was a pastoral assistant in a Church of England parish within London, England I helped with a funeral of one beloved member. I was in charge of writing the prayers for the funeral service and because this member was so loved, I wanted them to be as good as possible. As I was writing them in the parish office, another church member came into the office named Vida. Vida was from a small village in Ghana and immigrated with her family to the UK about 10 years prior so that her grandchildren could attend university. Vida was a woman of wisdom, experience, and faith who was very active in our faith community and seen by many as a wise elder and who was consistently there for people. She noticed that I looked frustrated and I explained to her how I just couldn't seem to write a good prayer. "Well," she said (sitting down next to me) "do you know what prayers do for the ones who pass on?" She then proceeded into a long story and explanation about how this recent church member was now a great spirit, detached from their body, floating around and saying goodbye. It is then the prayer (I assumed she meant the funeral prayer) that ignites the resurrected Jesus fire which will then rise (I couldn't exactly tell what she meant by this term) all of us first and all living things around us (she pointed to a poster of the Tree of Life on the opposite wall in the office). The Jesus fire and the spirit of the church member will then meet at the cross and the fire will pull the spirit into the Great Paradise (she bowed and made a gesture towards the ground). "Your prayer just needs to call on the Great Paradise in order to resurrect the Jesus fire." She then gave me a big hug and left.

-Now, I don't know where to start in addressing the numerous western orthodoxal heresies within Vida's explanation of Jesus, God, and the resurrection. They are so numerous it's almost laughable. Vida's Christian understanding (obviously influenced by her African roots) of God is vastly different from mine being mostly brought up within western Christian practice. But, is it a wrong understanding? Who and what is God in our time and space to us?

Solution: God is always bigger than we think and encompasses more than we dare to believe.

-I think on this Earth Day, this question becomes extremely important. Because Christianity for many generations, especially western Christianity, I believe, has not traditionally seen God beyond an Orthodox understanding. We all know the story: God came to us as a human being, suffered death, and rose again as a physical human being permitting all of us humans who believe in this human being's resurrection to go to a "place" called Heaven. Now, I believe this story is absolutely true and is something I have faith in. But is this story the only story that is true? Is this the only way for a Christian to know who God is through Jesus Christ?

- Unfortunately, this well-known Christian story has led to what I believe is a persecution. Not of human beings (though that might be debatable), but of the Earth.

There has been no room, traditionally, in this Orthodox understanding of God for the Earth and it has been used to justify destruction. If God is a human being and absent from the Earth, then we have nothing to worry about in taking from the Earth what we need at will.

-This understanding has led to many statements and actions by people across the globe in destroying and polluting Creation. Most publically, perhaps, culminating in a statement by James Watt, the Secretary of the Interior under President Reagan who said to a Congressional Panel: "God gave us these things to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back."

-Indeed, if we follow this logic and it is true, we are well on our way to Christ coming back: half of all animal and plant species could face extinction by 2050, Americans dump 16 tons of sewage into their waters every minute, we lose 375 km of forest every day, and 80% of the world's original forests are gone.¹ Our taking of the Earth has now had such an impact that it is now beginning to negatively impact *human* health in significant ways. Christ hasn't come back, yet more of us are breathing polluted air, drinking contaminated water, and living on a warmer Earth. Something is wrong and it seems like a possible re-evaluation is needed. Who is God?

- "Don't tell God how big your storm is, tell the storm how big your God is."

-Peter was faced with this question in a huge way in our reading from the Book of Acts today. Here was someone who was a good Jew who followed Jewish *Kosher* eating customs: he didn't eat pork, drained the all the blood before consuming, and only accepted food prepared by fellow Jews. Yet, here he was challenged to not only eat the food prepared by Cornelius and Gentiles (non-Jews), but to also take the radical step of *baptizing* these "heathens". He was challenged to see God in a bigger way. Thank God he did see God in a bigger way. For our Christian community would not be here right now if Peter, Paul, and the other disciples of Jesus had just followed their traditional understanding of who God is. Our Christian community is based on an expanded understanding of who God is and where God dwells. I think we need to continue that tradition.

Implication: Living our lives and trusting in a BIG God.

-Here's an example: Did God dwell in the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus' body? Yes. But can we see God's incarnation in Jesus also as God's incarnation with the *entire* Earth? Can we see Jesus' resurrection not just in his body, but in the Earth itself? I think, for the future of humankind in relationship to Earth, it is essential to challenge ourselves and our tradition to see a bigger God .

-In our class on the Gospel of John right now, the people attending can tell you that I have been as clear as possible on what the Gospel means by the label of "the Jews".

¹ <http://worldcentric.org/conscious-living/environmental-destruction>

“The Jews” appears in a lot of places in this gospel text and has been a free ticket to persecuting our Jewish brothers and sisters for over 1,000 years. Yet, one forgets that Jesus, Mary, and the disciples *are Jews* and in John 4:22 it even goes on to say: “salvation comes from the Jews.” So an argument that this is just a blanket, general term that refers to an ethnic population doesn’t make any sense and anyone using this argument is extremely misinformed. The Gospel of John doesn’t see this as an ethnic label, but a theological one. Dr. Frank Maloney, Roman Catholic scholar on the Gospel of John writes: “[This term] is meant to describe those who have closed their minds to Jesus or reject his disciples because they have decided there is on “one way to God” and Jesus is not a part of that. The “Jews” refer to the ones who are living in a closed religious system.” Can we all have a bit of “the Jews” in us? Can we, too, live in a closed religious system that limits God?

-Theologian Karen Armstrong says: “It’s not about believing in one thing, it’s about living. ‘Religion,’ is not about having to take a litmus test and believe or accept certain difficult propositions; instead, religion is about doing things that change you.”

-Which brings me back to Vida. Now, St. Michael’s Church of Camden Town could, in theory, throw Vida out because she is not professing Jesus Christ as “Lord and Savior” in accordance with the Lord’s Prayer and Apostle’s Creed. In telling me her faith, she is technically spreading heresy. But this would be unthinkable, even laughable. For even the members who had a strict understanding of the Christian faith in accordance with the western traditions of the church loved, valued, and respected Vida as a fellow Christian and sister in Christ. Maybe this is where Jesus truly dwells.

-“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”(John 14: 35)

-May we, like the apostle Peter, be challenged in who God is and how God is present. May we have the courage to expand our tradition beyond the “closed religious system.” And may we see the Earth not as void, but as partner, the new “Gentile” one who can teach us the newness and radical presence of God. Amen.