

Wednesday 12th April 2017

The Way of Not Knowing

A lady was visiting a church one Sunday. The sermon seemed to go on forever, and many in the congregation fell asleep. After the service, she walked up to a very sleepy-looking gentleman, extended her hand in greeting, and said, "Hello, I'm Gladys Dunn." The gentleman replied, "You're not the only one ma'am, I'm glad he's done, too!"

I rather suspect you'll be very glad when we get another day closer to Easter and I'll be done!

The numerical decline and financial crises that beset many churches, are not, in themselves Christian motives for mission. And so, the argument goes, it's not new strategies or structures we need, so much as new ways of seeing and imagining.

I think that's why Bishop Robert's simple priorities of growing in prayer, making disciples and serving the people of Devon with joy have resonated with people from one end of the diocese to the other. In times of disorientating change we need to discern what to take with us and what to leave behind. But we live in times where the value of anything is measured by its usefulness. The danger, of course, is that in making such an assessment in our spiritual life we are mirroring the assumptions of the culture around us rather than challenging them. In other words: it's too

easy to translate our cultural assumptions of usefulness into an assessment of our collective spiritual life.

On Monday evening I suggested that there are three or four marks of a spirituality — a way of relating to God, if you like — that are profoundly counter-cultural. So far I have proposed that **Loss, Waiting and Darkness** are states that our culture wishes to avoid or minimise. And yet, to embrace them is actually to find ways of spiritual growth, individually and collectively. So, to our fourth mark: the **Way of Not Knowing**.

This evening our slow and steady progress through John's gospel leads us ever closer to Jesus' passion and death. And, as it happens, into considerable confusion. At the heart of our gospel narrative there seems a glorious lack of comprehension! No-one seems to have a clue about what's going on:

- *the disciples looked at one another **uncertain of whom [Jesus] was speaking** ... (v22)*
- *...reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, '**Lord, who is it?**' (v25)*
- *Jesus said to him, '**Do quickly what you are going to do.**' Now **no one at the table knew why** he said this to him. (v28)*

You could be forgiven for thinking that those around Jesus were clueless. They just seem **not to know**.

I endured last week without a broadband connection... Yes, I know - the end of the world as we know it! (Well, the end of the world might well have happened, but we would have been the last to know anything about it.) I won't bore you with how the whole saga arose, or with the seemingly endless calls to the company to come and sort it out. A connection was only restored yesterday afternoon... (I typed that sentence in hope and trust last Saturday afternoon!)

The slightest interruption to our wireless connectedness can be a challenge indeed. You see, **our age has made a technology out of information.** (Runcorn, p16) We consider it our *right* to whatever knowledge we think we need! My daughter and her partner were about to fly back from Portugal, but it was foggy in Exeter on Saturday morning. "Will their flight back to Bristol be delayed?" asked my wife. No problemo! Just a few quick keystrokes and I knew the plane outward bound to Faro was on time... had landed early in fact... yes, the return flight left on schedule... and they were now in Bristol. So much information just out there for the taking! It's just no effort to know stuff when it's so accessible to us.

But David Runcorn insists that there is an ancient way of Christian spiritual formation that our age desperately needs. The Orthodox Church calls this the 'apophatic' way. Sorry for the word! The term stresses the limits of our human capacity to see, or speak of, or understand — God at all. God will always be greater than our concepts or images of God.

Now before you worry that this feels like trying to know about something without a broadband connection; this does not lead us to despair of ever being able to say anything meaningful about God. Rather it tips us into the deeper mystery of the nature of God. This apophatic way does not lead to emptiness but fullness.

Think about Moses and his encounter with God in the burning bush; think about Elijah encountering God not in the earthquake or the wind and storm, but in the still small voice; think about St Paul pointing his listeners to ‘the unknown God’...

St Cyril of Jerusalem said in the 4th century: “For we explain not what God is, but candidly confess that we have not exact knowledge concerning Him. For in what concerns God, to confess our ignorance is the best knowledge.”

So the apophatic tradition “is a saving contradiction in an age like ours. It reminds us that all our ways of knowing, thinking and speaking about ourselves and God need cleansing, redeeming and utterly transforming... It reminds us sternly of God’s mystery and unutterable glory.” (Runcorn, p17)

We have access to information and knowledge like never before; but that brings its own pressure. The pressure to know, to be in control, to have all the answers is, in the end, unbearable. The *un*-knowability of the God who is in our midst is good news, because we are then reminded that God is greater than our power to describe or imagination to conceive. Or as dear St Anselm wrote: “God is that than which nothing is greater.”

The Way of Loss, the Way of Waiting, of Darkness and of Not Knowing - states of mind and being for which no one would thank you, but part and parcel of the week which leads to the way of the Cross.