

Second Sunday before Lent 2018: Col.1:15-20; Jn.1:1-14

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

A few years ago, Stephen Fry went on one of the biggest chat shows on Irish TV, the Gay Byrne Show. Fry, of course, is a very public and very vocal atheist, and Byrne pressed him on the point. What would Fry say if he got to the end of his life, and it turned out that he was wrong, that God was after all real? Here's how the rest of the conversation went:

Host: *Suppose it's all true, and you walk up to the pearly gates and you are confronted by God. What will Stephen Fry say to him, her or it?*

Stephen Fry: *I'd say, bone cancer in children? What's that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It's not right, it's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid god who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain? That's what I would say.*

Host: *And you expect to get in?*

Stephen Fry: *No, but I wouldn't want to. I wouldn't want to get in on his terms. They're wrong. Now if I died and it was Pluto, Hades, and if it was the twelve Greek gods, then I would have more truck with it. Because the Greek were... they didn't pretend not to be human in their appetites, and in their capriciousness, and in their unreasonableness. They didn't present themselves as being all seeing, all wise, all kind, all beneficent.*

Because the god who created this universe, if it was created by a god, is quite clearly a maniac, an utter maniac, totally selfish. We have to spend our life on our knees thanking him? What kind of god would do that?

Yes, the world is very splendid, but it also has in it insects whose whole life cycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and make them blind. They eat outwards from the eyes. Why? Why did you do that to us? You could easily have made a creation where that didn't exist.

It is simply not acceptable. It is monstrous, simply monstrous, and that God deserves no respect whatsoever. And the sooner you banish him, life becomes simpler, better, purer, cleaner.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-suvkwNYSQo>

And for many, many people Fry got it spot on. And incidentally many of them are the young. We spend so much time worrying about how to make the church attractive to young people that we often forget one simple reason why they do not come: it's not that the service is too early, or too traditional, too long or too boring – it's that they simply don't believe. They listen to a Fry, and they think he's right. And too often we don't really know how to respond.

Now, at one level, that's because there is no response. No set of clever words which makes something like bone cancer in children OK, which lets God off the hook. The only real response we have to the suffering all around us is love. And Fry's rage shouldn't make us forget that actually, it is believers who have been at the forefront of meeting suffering with love. It wasn't atheists who built the first hospitals in Europe, or who provide most of the health care and education throughout the developing world, or who do the vast bulk of prison visiting in this country. In every case, look to the believers.

Nevertheless, Fry's charge still stings. What kind of God lets this stuff happen in the first place? Who are we worshipping?

The New Testament's answer is put brilliantly in our reading from Colossians:

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God ... in Him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God ... in Him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

In other words, if you want to know what God is like, get to know Jesus.

It's not that without Jesus you can know *nothing* of God – the Bible is clear that all people can and should know *something* of Him.

But only in Jesus, Christianity teaches, only in Jesus is there fullness: only in Jesus do we see the mystery made plain, the invisible revealed, - or as St John puts it, the word made flesh.

So what kind of God do we worship? The answer is: the one like Jesus.

And what does that mean? The answer to that question can only grow bigger and deeper and truer as we get to know Him better, but for this morning I'd put it like this:

God is like the Jesus who everywhere he went gave people their dignity back. The one, say, who calls an old crippled woman from the back of the synagogue, where she sits crushed by sickness, by age, by disdain and poverty, and says 'stand up straight, o daughter of Abraham'. Stand up straight, at the heart of God's people; stand up straight despite all that would keep you down.

That's what Jesus does, through all the Gospels. Stand up straight, he says, free from your sickness. Your sin. Your greed. Your past, your failures, your fear. You are loved, he says. You are a beloved child of God, and nothing, not even death, can change that. So be not afraid. Stand up straight.

And that's what God does. It's what he tells us, what he does inside us, what all of this, being in church, is meant to be about: being set free from fear, from all that keeps us from being what he made us to be. You are my beloved child. Stand up straight.

Secondly, God is like Jesus because, as the Bible says, nothing is impossible with Him. That old woman really was crippled, her spine was bent over. Jesus did not just give her dignity: he straightened her bones. The thing that seemed so fixed, so hopeless, is suddenly not: it's

open, it's full of hope. Jesus is the one who opens doors that always seemed shut, and opens them so they can never be closed again. And he does it with more than spines: He takes lives consumed by greed and makes them generous; he takes those filled with hate and helps them love. He will take those, we trust, who lie all around us in the ground and he will bring them to astonishing new life. For nothing will be impossible with God.

It's not, of course, that miracles are happening all the time – not every problem gets fixed here and now. Even the crippled old woman died, later on. Most of the time, most of our struggles continue, and our freedom is won only by inches. Healing for now is only partial: for now, we see as if in a mirror dimly. But one day, Jesus promises, we will see face to face. One glorious day, we shall be free. All our present darkness is lit up by his promise: nothing now is set in stone. There is such a thing as grace and grace changes everything.

And we know that because of the third and greatest way in which Jesus is the image of the invisible God: as he hangs stretched out on the Cross. Stephen Fry calls God the utterly selfish one, who cares nothing for the pain and suffering of his world. But Christians think God is here: that in Jesus, he stepped out of Heaven and walked right into the heart of our misery. That he makes it his own. That whatever catastrophic pain we have suffered or inflicted, He endures it too – and because he endures, he rescues.

Think of it this way. Imagine all the pain and sorrow of the world, as the Bible often does, as a dark and menacing sea. It threatens to drown us, to swallow us up. Well, the Gospel is that God has dived right down into its darkest, coldest, deadliest depths. That he is *there* – there with the desperate, the guilty, the bereaved, the tormented. With each one of us. And, as the prophet said, he has opened up a way in the heart of the sea – a way that leads back up from the shadows of death, into the world of life and peace. Hold onto Him, and He will take you there.

That's what the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus did. No-one's story, however humanly desperate, has to end in darkness and misery. All of our stories, however dark, are now written in a bigger one: the story of the God in Jesus who went to Hell and came back again, and who takes us with Him as He goes. All of us, if we want, can live again.

This doesn't answer Stephen Fry's points. It would take more than ten minutes, and more than words, to do that. But it is a start. What kind of God do we worship? One like Jesus. One who is astonishingly bigger, deeper, more mysterious and more loving than Fry has begun to imagine. One like Jesus, who dwelt in Jesus in all in his fullness. One who gives us dignity, who sets us free, whose death and resurrection gives us hope. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Peter Waddell