

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 27 JANUARY 2008

Rev. Dr John Bodycomb

Isaiah 9: 1-4; Matthew 4: 12-23

“Are We ‘Home Alone’ in the Universe?”

Today is Mozart's birthday and also the birthday of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, an Anglican priest born 1832 in Cheshire. Dodgson is better known as Lewis Carroll – creator of puns, nonsense rhymes and the little girl whose adventures have been translated into almost every major language.

Aside from living with Alice and the Cheshire Cat and the Mad Hatter, Dodgson also lived at the frontier between science and godtalk. He was a distinguished mathematician, and one of the earliest clergy to reconcile in his own head Darwin's theory of natural selection with religious thought. He found evolution perfectly compatible with the creative and guiding power of God. He saw no conflict between the universe having a certain independence of its own, and a view that saw God at work.

Remembering Dodgson (or Lewis Carroll) today gives me a springboard into the issue our minister had intended to address; namely, the sense in which God is active in the universe – ‘bringing in the kingdom’, as the bible would put it. In what sense *is* God active? Three points . . .

I

First, **God is with us as one who lets go**. This is a different spin on Jesus' metaphor of 'cosmic parent' (father). Let me remind you that parenting involves withdrawing protection, direction and correction: letting go.

My father was a good model as a man and as parent. His maturing had been sped up by enlistment in the First AIF. He fought in France and Belgium and at twenty was a decorated veteran. At thirty-two he married my mother; I arrived a year later. I assume that as a small child I was protected, directed and corrected by him. However, I have little recollection of this. He must have tried to help me develop my own mental and moral resources quite early. All I remember by way of rebuke was his occasional "Where's your judgement, man?" He bought me a full-size bicycle when I was eleven. I had to lean it against the fence to board, and took a few falls. He taught me to drive on country roads when I was fourteen, and let me take the car once I had a licence.

My strongest impressions are that he believed in me, trusted me, let me have my head, and didn't fuss when I did something juvenile, dangerous or stupid. There was that mishap with a cow, of course. A bunch of them were straggling across the road and I aimed for a space. It closed up. Mother became excited, my little sister burst into tears and I concluded my driving days were over. We surveyed the damage in silence. Dad seized the torn mudguard and there was a crunch as he pulled it away from the wheel. We picked up bits of a headlamp and a door handle. Anxiously I said, "What now?" Dad spoke his first and last words on the subject: "Drive on."

Not everyone can tell a story like that. I was fortunate. My father gave me great freedom, and yet was a major influence on my life. Had my memory been of someone still protecting, still directing, still correcting me at seventeen or eighteen, I may have concluded God was like that – or should be like that.

I realise the bible gives us a picture of One who sometimes protects, directs and corrects, but there's another and more subtle message, especially in the story of creation. The Adams Family are depicted as God's farm managers. This implies that God believes in humanity, trusts humanity, is ready to let humanity have the kind of freedom that could be misused. The operative word is God's trust in humanity! And that means a big, big risk. But this is the way it is with the whole shebang. Sir John Polkinghorne, the distinguished priest-physicist, says, "God allows the world to *make itself* with all the necessary raggedness and blind alleys which will inescapably come with that." So, God is with us (and with everything) as one who 'lets go'.

II

Second, **God is with us as one who limits godself**. The late Arthur Peacocke, former chemistry professor at Oxford and Anglican priest, saw God as having renounced 'omnipotence' and 'omniscience'. That is, God wasn't all-powerful and all-knowing. Peacocke says this is implied in our saying that God's nature is love. Love makes itself 'vulnerable', you see.

Some years ago I met Rabbi Gunther Plaut, President of the American Council of Jewish Rabbis. He said it was not correct to say God was *omnipotent*. By an act of sovereign will, God relinquished omnipotence by giving freedom to the creation. God cannot take that back without acting in a way contrary to his nature. Charles Birch says there are things a God of love cannot do. "The God of love could not change the decision of the rich young ruler to whom Jesus spoke. When persuasion failed, coercion did not take over."

Rabbi Plaut said it was also incorrect to say God was *omniscient*; that God could know everything – including what you and I might do in the next five minutes or five years. If God knew everything, then God could never be surprised or have second thoughts. He referred to the Noah story in Genesis 6. "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was *sorry* that he had made humankind on the earth!" If God can have regrets, the implication is that God thinks he made a mistake! I know this sounds like we're talking of God in crudely human terms, but make allowances for the antiquity of the story.

The point is that it's wrong to say God is all-powerful and all-knowing. If you give someone autonomy, then you've limited your power by the extent of that, and you can't know what they will do because that lies in the openness of the future. John Polkinghorne says we live in a world whose ground rules don't specify everything that will happen. He says, "they outline an envelope of future possibilities . . . we live in a world of flexible openness."

III

Third point: **God is with us in a 'reciprocal' relationship**. Indeed, God is responsive to what we do (and fail to do). Arthur Peacocke said God is the great improviser; has to be!

Try to imagine David Attenborough invites you to partner him on a two-month exploration of some tropical rain forest – with camera crew, fuel and food drops. Suppose you ask him what will be the precise outcome of this adventure. What would be your reaction if he said, "Well, I haven't fixed all the details. Mainly we're after more knowledge of rain forest flora and fauna. Come with me and we'll work it out as we go." Obviously his being the senior partner will mean Mr Attenborough has a major influence. But you'll have freedom to disagree, to initiate some activities yourself, and also to influence the final outcome of the project. You're in a 'reciprocal' relationship with Mr Attenborough.

To push this fantasy a little further, it may be that you'll run into some conflict and some mutual disappointment – neither of you feeling entirely happy with the other. Mr Attenborough may turn out different from what you expected, and you different from what he would prefer. (Remember the Noah story) If you should prove at times to be a bit obtuse or obstinate, he may register real sadness and some disillusionment with you. After all, when you are thrown fairly close together, this sort of thing is part and parcel of a relationship. At the end of the two months neither you nor David Attenborough will be the people you were at the start of the expedition. The relationship itself will be different too.

I invite you to consider this as the way things are between God and the universe, between God and planet earth, between God and you and me. Traditionalists want to protest at this and call us back to ideas of a God who is unaffected and immutable (unchangeable). To that I can only say, "Does not Christian faith suggest that God suffers?" If God 'feels', then God *is* affected. What about God changing God's mind? Obviously if God has left the way open for us to misuse our freedom and make a mess, and God is engaged with and within the whole process of what's happening, then God must be able to have a change of mind! Charles Birch says, "If God is love and if that love is responsive, God is not the unmoved mover of classical theism. God to be love must be intimately affected by the plight and suffering of the world."

Let me conclude by telling you why I find so-called 'creationism' silly. It allows no room for God to be still creating. It says everything was finished in some fictitious week about 6,500 years ago. Scientists tell us the whole system is still in process of becoming. Creation is not an event; it is a process. The universe has freedom to respond or not respond to possibilities yet to be realised. God presents what is actual in our world, and in our lives, with what is possible. Jesus does this with his vision of the kingdom of God.

The minister and I have both embraced Charles Birch's wonderful concept of 'The Great Persuader'. Not the great manipulator, but the persuasive power of love at the very heart of reality, responding at every moment to the creation's exercise of its freedom, and luring it onward and upward. This way of thinking about God is true to your life, and it also fits with what scientists show us about the way things work. Listen for The Great Persuader.