

Ordination Service Sermon

Gordon Murray died last Thursday aged 95.

Gordon who?

Gordon Murray, of course, the creator of the magical television series – the first children’s programme to be screened in colour. The show was called “Trumpton”. It ran when most of you:

- Naomi Cook from posh Cheltenham whom I’ve known for many a year;
- John Hughes from Bridlington, a Welshman in Yorkshire and, therefore, definitely a missionary;
- Deborah Mallet, also an old friend, from near Bristol;
- Jennifer Matthews from the Southwest Cheshire Circuit, living in Audlem with a view into the promise land;
- Gillian Sharp from Wigan where they play bowls on crooked greens and the wrong kind of rugby;
- Julia Slatt from Copmanthorpe in York, upmarket and historical;
- Rachel Wheeler from Pen-y-bont ar Ogwr, Bridgend in other words, in the land of the conquering heroes, a land flowing with grit and teamwork, where they speak the language of heaven;

..... were only just (or not even yet) born.

Before the Fire Brigade Union was politicised, the Trumpton team were out rescuing cats, hosing down the roads in a heatwave, and unclogging anything that was clogged.

We all remember the call to arms given to Gordon Murray’s firemen: “Pugh, Pugh, Barney McGrew, Cuthbert, Dibble and Grub.” I’ve taken and shaken this formula and applied its rhythms it to our brave ordinands to give them “a liturgical shape”. From now on they are: Naomi, John, Deborah and Gill, Jennifer, Julia and Raitch!

*Our revs contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly, they scan (nearly)!*

I was ordained in the year that King Uzziah died. Or it seems like that now. In the intervening years, so much has changed. And yet, so much has remained the same. And it’s this “same” that I want to address this evening.

Let’s begin with the holiness that is God. Holy, holy, holy – that’s the song that’s sung. God is totally Other. When I was starting out, it was fashionable to refer to God as “the ground of our being,” or “the beyond in the midst”. A more apophatic

way of describing things saw God as a pin-prick in darkness, a presence in absence. And Ludwig Wittgenstein reminded us that “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should keep silent.” All of these ways of describing a God who had previously been thought of in extra-spacial terms, indicates how he defies all attempts to locate him, to define her, to reduce him to a creedal formula or a tidy doctrine, to belittle her with our own littleness.

We should remember Robert Browning’s *bon mot*: “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp or what’s a heaven for?” Only we might want to tweak it: “Our yearning spirit should exceed our understanding or what exactly does God amount to?”

Rudolph Otto, a German theologian, wrote his famous “The Idea of the Holy” almost a hundred years ago. For him all talk of God was about what he called “numinous”. God was, he wrote, “a non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling, whose primary and immediate object was outside the self”.

The holiness of God is in his otherness. Our piety so easily trivialises her. The mystery of God is too deep for words, too awesome for neat theories, too profound to sum up with a slogan. Remember that line from Shakespeare’s Macbeth. After he’d murdered the King he described his plight thus:

*But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears.*

Too much conventional Christianity has also been bound in to creeds and dogmas, confessions of faith, which hint at an insecurity based on “saucy doubts and fears.”

The prophet felt that this experience of proximity to God, the holy God, Other, pure celestial fire, meant that he was doomed. You could not think of looking at God and expect expecting to live. The finest preacher can hint at God but shouldn’t ever pretend to domesticate her, to reduce her to an equation, to turn him into a puppet. All we can do at the end of the day is repeat the song of the seraphim and cherubim: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.”

And so: Naomi, John, Deborah and Gill, Jennifer, Julia and Raitch,

May you stand in the presence of the living God, and may we all one day cast our crowns before him, lost in wonder, love, and praise. Those are attitudes rather than formulations of words.

If all this is true, how then do we deal with this ineffable, inscrutable, unfathomable God? How do we preach her? For we’re all preachers.

Easy peasy really.

We preach God through all that we’ve seen and heard, felt and known of Jesus. Jesus, on the human level, a descendant of David. But Jesus, also, on the level of the spirit, proclaimed Son of God by an act of power that raised him from the dead.

The Jesus whose example and teaching, whose lifestyle and modelling of what it means to be fully human, has, through the resurrection, been taken into the Godhead. In his divinity he is now beyond reach as Other, as God himself. But not before the seal has been set on his humanity – it has been lifted up to bring all people of the nations to faith.

It's Jesus, his life, teaching, suffering and death that preaches. His incarnation, passion, saving death and glorious resurrection continue to yield endless fare for rich sermons. Gosh we can remember the songs of Charles Wesley that say this:

*My God, I am thine,
What a comfort divine,
What a blessing to know that my Jesus is mine!
In the heavenly lamb,
Thrice happy I am,
And my heart, it doth dance, at the sound of his name!*

Through Jesus, we catch intimations of immortality, glimpses of glory, sensings of the luminous, numinous, otherness of God. He is the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega, the door to the sheepfold, the shepherd of the sheep, the way, the truth, and the life.

And so: Naomi, John, Deborah and Gill, Jennifer, Julia and Raitch – offer your congregations Christ. Christ and him crucified. Hold thou the cross before their wondering eyes.

So far so good. But how does it all work out in practice? Our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans has it. It could be so negative. William Blake, buried in the graveyard across the street from us, had a little phrase, once an examination question that I had to discuss, "the cistern contains while the fountain o'erflows". Our religion could be the cistern that cramps and shapes experience holding it fast within its confines. Or it could be a fountain that overflows, it could be life in the spirit, life shooting up into eternal life. In my youth, religion was so negative. It had settled for mere moralising. If you had fun, it was proof of sin. William Blake once again got this right in his poem "The Garden of Love".

*I went to the Garden of love
And saw what I never had seen;
A Chapel was built in the midst
Where I used to play on the green;*

*And the gates of the Chapel were shut!
And "thou shalt not" writ over the door.
So I turned to the garden of love
Which so many sweet flowers bore.*

*And I saw it was fillèd with graves,
And tombstones where flowers should be,
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.*

That's the negative. The positive, laid out so eloquently by St Paul, refers to the transforming and renewing of our minds. It asks us never to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. It urges us to recognise, affirm and channel the various and diverse gifts of the members we serve. We are to hold fast what is good, to love one another with mutual affection, to rejoice in hope. We are to be patient in suffering, persevering in prayer. And we should contribute to the needs of the saints while also extending hospitality to strangers (what a message for our day). In all things, we should look to ensure the primacy of love, that most excellent way, love, genuine and unconditional love.

So that's the programme. That's what you are called to do. That's what this evening's service is all about. Once we say our final amen, we shoo you off and put all that into practice.

And so I draw to an end. I've left till last a need I feel to make a public confession. I have sinned, my brothers and sisters, and I must come clean with you. *Mea culpa* isn't good enough; *Mea maxima culpa* it should be. For the sin that's eating away at me is not an ordinary sin. It's a sin which they call, in Catholic circles, a mortal sin. My whole being is being consumed as I speak to you right now. An evil spirit lurks in the inner corridors of my being. It's the green-eyed monster to which I refer. Envy, Jealousy. For I wish, o how I wish, that I were where you are and starting out all over again. Dear brother, dear sisters:

Naomi, John, Deborah and Gill, Jennifer, Julia and Rachel,

Good luck as we wish you on your way.

The Lord bless you and bless you kindly.

Today and every day of your ministry.

Amen.