

Christ Church, Bath

Sung Eucharist

Last after Trinity

Sunday 29 October 2023, 10am

Canon Simon Tatton-Brown

St Matthew 22.34–46

*Alternative Collect*

Merciful God,  
teach us to be faithful in change and  
uncertainty,  
that trusting in your word  
and obeying your will  
we may enter the unfailing joy  
of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Do you find it easy to talk about God? I suspect not. But that's what I'm going to try to do this morning, and I'm going to fail.

I'll begin by harking back to a brilliant talk three of us here heard in The Mews a couple of weeks ago. Bishop Paul Bayes, former Bishop of Liverpool, now living here in Bath, was addressing the local branch of Modern Church. He began his talk by recalling words he'd heard spoken over fifty years ago by a priest in East Anglia.

This is what the priest said. *God is at the same time more immanent than we imagine; and at the same time, more transcendent.* Let me repeat: *God is at the same time more immanent than we imagine; and at the same time, more transcendent.*

Immanent. That means close by. Jesus began his ministry preaching 'The Kingdom of God is at hand'. He taught that whatsoever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters we do also to him, Jesus Christ the Son of God.

And transcendent. You can't describe God. The word 'describe' comes from the Latin, *de* – around, and *scribere* to write. But God has no

borders. You can't draw a line round God, you can't pin God down. Which is why we often talk about what God isn't. God doesn't die, you can't see God. God is *Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes*.

This statement of faith is full of paradox.

A paradox is when you hold on to two completely incompatible statements at the same time. *Dox*, from the Greek *dokeo* to believe; *para*, well think of two parallel lines which never meet. How can you hold two truths together which never meet? How can we believe in someone who can be both there and not there at the same time? It's very difficult.

It gets worse. Remember, that East Anglian priest said that God is both these things 'more than we can imagine'. Let's just think about the text 'whatsoever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters we do also to [Christ]'. It means God is with the lowest of the low. Not just those on the margins, those outside the margins. In practical terms, what do we think about those who are the lowest in our estimation, still less do to love them? What about those whom we want

to send to prison and throw away the key. “Lord, when did we visit you in prison?”

Now what about transcendence? It sounds such a wonderful concept, all ethereal like a baroque church, as wonderfully mysterious as the Transfiguration. Until you try saying your prayers and God doesn't seem to be there. Some of us meet with Lore online at eight every morning to say Morning Prayer, a large part of which is taken up by reciting the psalms. The psalmist often couldn't find God, not in his prayers, not in the world around him: “Hear my prayer, O God; hide not yourself from my petition” (Psalm 55). What about when God doesn't seem to answer our petitions? We've all been here. More I suspect than we'd care to admit in church.

In his talk Bishop Paul went on to say that his faith in God had two poles, two anchor points, two points of focus. One was (of course) God, the other was England (he was at this point talking about the role of the Church of England). At Christ Church we could say the area around Julian Road, or where we live, our family, our work, politics. But because faith in a paradox is

inherently so difficult, many Christians (and many Christian communities, including much of the C of E, including me) find it more comfortable to focus somewhere between these two poles, and for us that place is The Church.

Just look, he said, at the agenda of the Church of England. What's been obsessing us through much of our lifetimes? When he and I were young it was reforming the liturgy. Church Assembly and later General Synod spent over forty years debating how to move on from the Book of Common Prayer. It took over a decade to decide whether to call God 'you' or 'thou'! We spent about thirty years agonising about divorce and remarriage, and just look at the time and energy being spent on our current arguments over human sexuality.

Meanwhile what's been happening in the world? Fewer and fewer of us have been trying to *engage* with God (which isn't quite the same time as saying *believe* that there is a God); and the plight of the poor and marginalised to say nothing of the planet and issues of war and peace have got worse and worse.

This morning we heard how a lawyer tried to test Jesus with a question. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He answered by referring to the two poles of faith that Bishop Paul talks about: God, and neighbour. The Pharisees and lawyers and others found it too hard to live with this paradox. In a way, the lawyer’s binary question betrays this. It’s not just them however. We too find trying to engage with a transcendent God a pretty thankless task. Try going to a Quaker meeting, when the Friends sit in silence waiting on the Spirit. It’s hard work, it demands a lot of self-discipline. The temptation is to speak, to break the silence, to *do* something. St Luke also has a lawyer asking Jesus “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” and the Lord gives a similar reply to the one we heard today. I suspect the lawyer in Luke’s account expected Jesus to say something like ‘go to the synagogue, take part in the temple rituals, keep the commandments.’

Years ago the rector of the church I was attending before ordination was overworking and in danger of having a burn-out. A wise member

of the congregation pointed him to the wayside pulpit outside the Friends Meeting House in central Manchester which read “Don’t do something. Just sit there”.

Jesus’s reply to St Luke’s lawyer was of course the parable of the Good Samaritan. There are lots of lessons we can draw from it, one of which is that our neighbour is more often than not the outsider, the least of these our brothers and sisters. This leads us to a further point. We all fail to love our neighbour as ourselves. Which acknowledgement should, if we persist, lead us further on still.

I mentioned earlier how Jesus had begun his ministry by preaching “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” Too often we stop there, as if that is the full extent of his message. Yes, it is good news, gospel. But Jesus didn’t stop there even if we want to. “Repent” he continued, “and believe in the Gospel”. I take this to mean don’t let us cherry pick what Christ tells us, don’t just stop at church and let church take up all our time and energy, important though church may be.

Repent means much more than being or saying sorry. The Greek word used in the gospels is *metanoieō*, - *meta* beyond, *noieō* to think. So repentance also means thinking beyond, outside the box, radically. Only then will we truly believe in the good news, and start loving God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourselves.