

Exodus 24
Matthew 9 1-8

There are some pretty weird and, dare I say it, unhelpful things said about God these days.

Maybe this has always been the case but I do wonder whether it reflects our growing religious illiteracy as a society.

Which should concern us.

The other day I saw reported the results of a research project in the US which had asked people what they thought God looked like.

And compiling the results, the researchers had produced a photo-fit – rather like the police might do as they tried to catch a really wicked criminal.

The result was very odd – and not a little disturbing.

As far as I could see, based on the research, God looked like a white male with a slightly scary look in his eyes.

But to state the obvious, this is unhelpful because God doesn't look...

God doesn't look like anything.

This is to go down the wrong tack.

And then closer to home, some of you might have heard about the exchange on breakfast TV – Good Morning Britain.

(I know you all watch it!)

About God's gender.

This was prompted by a Yougov poll which found that half of 18-24 year-old Christians believe God is male (apparently much higher than in the over-65s).

Rachel Treweek, the Bishop of Gloucester, said that we should be open to referring to God as 'she'.

But then the indefatigable Piers Morgan asked whether this meant that God was gender fluid.

To which Ann Widdecombe chimed in she had never heard anything so preposterous in her life and of course we should refer to God as he.

At this point, you may, like me, want to put your head in your hands.

Definitely more heat than light!

God has no gender! Notwithstanding the gendered pronouns we may choose to use!

So, a question, prompted by the above:

How do we talk about God in an age when we seem to be finding this more and more difficult?

And a slightly different question:

How do we cultivate a sense of the divine, the transcendent, the holy, in a climate in which pursuing such things is widely seen as a life style choice alongside other options...?

Something we might choose to do like we might choose to do pilates or learn to dance.

Rather than something which is crucial to our very humanity.

We are restless until we find our rest in God.

How do we speak about God?

The first thing to say, I think, is that thinking about God is an imaginative act.

It is not that there are no rules – I hasten to add.

The Church has been thinking about these things for a while and there are certain things it has ruled out of court.

But even so thinking about God is an imaginative act.

My big breakthrough in my faith journey was realising that if I found someone's God talk unhelpful I didn't need to be beholden to it.

I could go round it.

Again, not a rule-less endeavour but an imaginative act, intrinsic to what it is to be human.

Secondly, the thing about God talk is that it doesn't always involve talking – at least not until we feel compelled to speak.

And please don't misunderstand that.

The point is it doesn't always involve talking, at least not until we feel compelled to speak.

We do speak too!

There are technical terms for this in theology.

Apophatic and cataphatic.

The terms are not important in and of themselves but they capture this idea of God talk where words are inadequate, language is stretched to breaking point, on the one hand.

Silence is the only thing

And, on the other hand, those occasions when we feel compelled to speak – to use words – even if we are quickly reminded of how our language, our God talk, is never adequate.

Do we see any pointers in this regard – i.e. how God-talk works – in our bible readings for today?

I think we do. Rather nicely in fact.

Take Exodus 24.

The story of Moses receiving the tablets of stone on the mountain.

There is in this passage a strong sense of ascent in its God-talk.

That is, an encounter with God is perhaps something we move towards. Ascend to.

Note the language in our Exodus reading.

Moses is invited to 'Come up to the Lord'

Moses and Aaron and the others, we are told, 'went up'.

And there's also that sense of language straining – of strained language.

Verse 10.

'Under God's feet [and that's a metaphor] there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.'

What a strange image!

It is not actually God that is being described – God is always beyond – but 'something like'.

It's an approximation, the best we can do.

And again in verse 17.

'...the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.'

God is not a devouring fire but is 'like' a devouring fire – the best we can do in terms of trying to speak about God.

And in our reading from Exodus, there are altars and offerings and sacrifices – and the need for mediation.

Moses ascends alone. Not everyone draws near to Almighty God.

And then there is the cloud.

If you have ever been in a cloud on a mountain-side, you will know what a strange and disorientating experience it is.

Thus, when we try and talk about God, this seems a reasonable image to conjure up.

In a dense cloud, you can see precious little at all – even losing sight of what is up and what is down.

The mist can blow in and out, briefly revealing vistas before they are lost again.

Moses entered the cloud, we are told, and was on the mountain for 40 days and nights.

So, the writers of Exodus are straining to say something about God and God's relationship with humans.

But if there is strangeness and the inadequacy of language in Exodus, there is also the God who is frighteningly close...

In the mire and muck of everyday lives.

Our lives.

We see this in our reading from Matthew's gospel.

People carrying a paralyzed man.

There is disability and struggle.

And there is bickering and arguing too.

Accusations of blasphemy by the scribes.

And yet there is also an act of healing.

Again, the gospel write is straining to say something about God's ways, God's nature.

But what we also hear in Matthew 9 is that the crowd was filled with awe (verse 8).

The circumstances of our Matthew reading and our Exodus reading on the face of it seem very different.

But they are both occasions when God acts and there is awe.

God, God-talk...

It is something like...

Something like the very heaven.

Something like a devouring fire on the top of mountain.

Something like a paralyzed man walking.

So, don't be wrong footed by some of the God talk which is around today and is faintly ridiculous – photo-fits of God.

But draw near...with your imagination.

Thanking God that even when we are far off God meets us in his Son, in Jesus Christ, and brings us home. Amen.