

Chairperson Lenten Letter of Encouragement

Dear friends,

I am pretty sure that the way in which we think about what God is like, is reflected in how we act, what we do and how we treat each other in the broadest sense. How could it be other? If we think about God as a distant judge weighing up our lives and at some future day of judgement consigning some to the reward of heaven and others to the punishment of hell – we will become people who judge and consign. How could it be other? If we think of God as the static fixed point beyond what is visible, the creator beyond whom there is nothing, the one who made all that is and who in turn appoints us as heirs, then we will think about all that we see as ours. How could it be other? The Old Testament presents both these images of God but it seems to me it is **not** the image to which Jesus subscribes, at least not entirely. Let me give you an example. We can take the first creation story in Genesis and read it as a description of how God brought the world into being. I want to suggest that this is to mistake the story for the message it seeks to convey. What if we were to read the first chapter of Genesis like this: there is chaos, there is always chaos, it is the medium in which we all live – it is a description of the world as it ever is - but in that chaos the indefinable holy appears like a light shining in darkness. The story moves on and the indefinable holy begins to act, creating order within, or against the background, of that ongoing chaos. Things are separated, named and given boundaries. The sea is the sea, the land is the land - each has its place. Chaos still impinges. There will be storms, the sea will at times invade the land and the land will impact the sea, but chaos no longer reigns supreme.

Human beings crave order. Imposing order is how we cope with the chaos that threatens, but we can never eliminate chaos entirely and, in fact, some chaos is essential. Without volcanoes, there is no new soil, without regenerated soil there is no food and so on... The first Genesis creation story is about how we live with chaos, how we can thrive, despite the fact that danger and death are real and lie at every turn. What Genesis says is that life - that inner sense of vitality and assurance, in the face of chaos, comes to us from our relationship with God. It is God who gives us life, which in the Biblical sense is about vitality, about thriving, about surviving the dreadful things that happen to us or that we imagine or foresee.

In our desire for order we can fall to an image of God that is of a distant creator to whom we are heirs, or a judge holding us to account, but in my view, these images do not address the central questions of our lives and are open to abuse in that we can, as heirs, quite easily put ourselves in the place of God. In the same way, we can slip into putting ourselves into the place of Jesus. Who has not heard or spoken of being Jesus hands and feet in the community (I know I have been guilty of this.) It elevates us above those we help, makes us superior and allows judgements about who is worthy of help and who is not. Charity is indeed cold. We are in a quite different place when we think of ourselves as followers of Jesus, knowing that every other person, every other thing, is equally in relationship with God and with us. When we are members of one family, we do not give, we share and we share in costly, life-giving ways.

In this way of thinking, the quality of the relationship, the extent of the relationship, the openness of the relationship we have with God and one another becomes central. I think this is what Jesus talked about- the quality of our relationships with God and each other - and how vital these are in keeping the chaos from overwhelming us. When we work from this place, chaos of the kind that damages relationships, sinks into the background. It is there - but it does not have the same power over us. Out of this framework, again it seems to me, Jesus taught that we should seek good for the other. Not what we decide is good, but good in the sense of what is demonstrably life-giving for the other. In this Lenten season I am asking you to ponder this: the definitions of resurrection include to *stand up straight, to be lifted up*. We are a resurrection people. In our relationships what helps everyone stand up straight, what lifts, what restores, what holds us in intimate life-giving, life receiving relationship with God and each other? How do we help each other to be a better version of ourselves, growing up into the maturity of Christ? It has something to do, I think, with: "Now I see you in this different light." It has something to do with: "I am sorry." It has something to do with: "How can we do better together," and doing it.

- Gereldine