

The Day of Pentecost 2013 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven??’!! Said The Voice in the passage just before this one describing what we call (for want of a better name), “The Ascension”. I suppose if one of the disciples had been a wise guy he’d have said, a la Willy Horton: “because that’s where God is!”!!

And there are lots of cartoons that reinforce that view, aren’t there? God, or angels, or the Pearly Gates, sitting in the clouds. Earlier this week I read a fascinating article by a former Church of England Priest, titled: “When did people stop thinking God lives on a cloud? Because we have stopped thinking that way – the old, 1st Century world-view of a three-tiered universe has, as they say, gone the way of all flesh for most of us.

Two 1945 mushroom clouds may have helped give clouds a bad name – more than that, though, they marked a moment when the world was introduced to the fruits of scientific study in an overwhelmingly undeniable way. As much as those mushroom clouds marked the birth of human tragedy on a scale never before seen, they also ushered in an age of scientific study and reflection never before seen in human history.

And that scientific study represented a significant challenge for religion. And religion responded. A book was written in 1963 – almost exactly 50 years ago – by the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich – John Robinson – called “Honest to God”. People lined up around the block to buy a copy. The British Prime Minister had to ask the publisher for a copy because by the time he realized how important the book was, it was completely sold out.

What the book did – with direct, almost searing honesty – was to try and demythologize religion, to lay aside what Robinson saw as myth and express faith in more concrete, less metaphorical terms – to re-describe Christianity in terms that made sense to the non-religious mind.

Another theologian – Paul Tillich – described God as the "ground of being", the power that sustains the cosmos in the face of the alternative, nothing. He argued that to be human is to have "ultimate concerns", namely something for which you would not only live, but die.

Jesus is an alluring figure not because he saves you from your sins and a wrathful God, or offers immortality, but because he displays the transforming potential of love.

Some of the more progressive forms of biblical study – such as the Jesus Seminar (of which I’m a member) – are based in this attempt at demythologization.

Fifty years after John Robinson we humans have both benefitted from the shift, and are also more aware than ever of the need for powerful metaphors of transformation in our lives.

That article I read had some interesting information about church attendance in Britain that mirror what’s happening on this continent. Regular church attendance has declined. But since the 1960s, belief in a "spirit or life force" has doubled, according to British Religion in Numbers -

41% of British people now believe in angels, 53% in an afterlife, and 70% in a soul – significantly higher than 20 years ago. Tillich’s “ground of being” has found it’s way into popular culture. Many of us remember Star Wars’ “May the Force be with you”. It’s not some idle science-fiction invention but a reflection of our human recognition of the “something” that we cannot explain except by metaphor and analogy. And if you wanted to say, in response, “And also with you” – the truth is that there is, there, a more profound recognition of that “something” beyond human language that underpins reality and ourselves than simply a joke about Christian liturgy being taken over by science fiction!

Bookstores have sections on “Mind, Body, Spirit” bigger than history, psychology or biography. Visit any holy pilgrimage site and you’ll find them thriving.

We are seeking the re-enchantment of things, and with the willing cooperation of science, physicists tell of vast cycles of cosmic death and rebirth. “It’s wonderful to be part of this majestic universe, they declare. Listen to quantum physicists and you’ll hear the language of mystery, language saying that the more we know the less we realize we know.

There has been a spontaneous human rediscovery of the spiritual dimension, if actually it ever died. 50 years into this paradigm shift in human understanding, we-the-Church find ourselves in a place where we again have significant gifts to share with humanity – not only, or perhaps even primarily, in the concrete ministries that we will continue to engage in, as Jesus instructed: feeding the poor, caring for the sick, and lost, and lonely. At this moment in human history what we have to offer is access to meaning, a way of looking at reality that is life-giving and can be life-transforming. Religious practices and theological traditions hold a wealth of insights that are needed if the questing is to deepen and grow. They help ground the speculations of New Age thought and offer means of discernment.

“There is something crucial going on in this welter of spiritual experimentation and exploration. We humans are the creatures for whom our own existence is too small. We yearn for more, for connection, for meaning. And moreover, we find it. All the scepticism in the world cannot put it down.” (Mark Vernon)

Now, before you all start patting yourselves on the back for being so smart as to continue allying yourselves with organized Christian practice, there’s a caution: many people no longer feel that Sunday worship and the images of God on offer are consonant with this new, emerging spiritual community.

The God of the Clouds, a three-tiered universe, humanity steeped in sin and in need of a holy wash cycle yet faced with an angry and vengeful male God – not only don’t these metaphors work anymore for most people, they’re actually very good reasons NOT to engage organized religion.

And there are many within the Church – and I’m one of them – who feel much the same way.

If we claim to be followers of a God who is continually making all things new, then why do we

so often seek to subvert that newness?

This day – the Day of Pentecost – is about newness. If you read behind the story you’ll hear the reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel – all understand the many languages as if they were one. But more importantly, this day uses the language of Spirit; it says, metaphorically, “it’s time for us to take up the tasks God has laid before you, and here is the gift that will provide you with the ability to do so.”

A couple of years ago, theologian Harvey Cox, famous for his first, ground-breaking book called “The Secular City”, wrote another that he observed came at the end (or toward it) of his writing career called “The Future of Faith” He essentially says in this book that, with the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Christian faith was co-opted into a soul-destroying institutionalism which, over the next 17 centuries, did a pretty good job of crushing any outpouring of the Spirit that threatened institutional control. But we are now living in an age, he says, when that sort of Christian dogmatism is giving way to a grassroots Christianity rooted in social justice and spirituality.

What does that mean for us, as part of the institutional expression of “Church”? I believe it means we have a responsibility to do at least two things:

1. Be true to the form of faith we have inherited. Ours is – liturgically and ecclesiologically – a more formal expression, informed by 20 centuries of experience.
2. But, secondly, we must be intentional in not allowing that institutionalism to crush the new movements of God’s Spirit. That means being open to the new possibilities out ahead of us – learning to ride the incoming tsunami of change rather than trying to build sand castle walls against it.

Here is a simple example within our walls on Sundays: we sing new music; we use new words. Worship forms us for the tasks that lie ahead of us.

If all we do is worship, however, then it holds little real meaning. We must engage the tasks that lie ahead of us with intention and purpose. What are they? The list starts with Jesus in today’s gospel: keep his commandments, which are, you’ll recall, the commandments from Torah: Love God and your neighbor as yourself. Or, to use another prophet - Micah’s – words: “Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly before God”.

As I said last week: there’s work to do. Today reminds us of that AND tells us from whom we get the strength to do it. May we do just that – the work God has given us to do. Amen.