

Thought for the Day – Friday 24th July 2020

Ineffable !

This is a great word that has pretty much fallen in disuse these days and one is likely to encounter it either in pub quizzes or in church readings. The dictionary gives it's meaning as "something too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words." Wow.

How does it relate to todays reading sna to life today?? Great question.

Our two readings for today come from JOB 42: 1-6 and John 3 : 1-15 and both deal with people who might be considered to be "know-alls". That term is typically used in a negative way to describe someone who is bombastic and loves to show off their learning. One could easily understand how it might apply to the Pharisees of old, particularly when dealing with the lower classes of their society. But like everything there is also a second side to the coin and the term can be used – with a different tone of voice of course – as a term of admiration for the wealth/scope of knowledge or learning that some one has. Typically in situations where the person is of a more humble nature and not so "in your face", and happily shares their knowledge and experience with others to help them grow and develop.

So how does this relate? The passage from Job comes toward the end of his lengthy trial and tribulations, and he has just finally finished arguing about the unfairness of it all with God, given he was totally devout etc. The "Why me O Lord" but in huge letters and it would have likely been in massive neon lights too if they'd had them in those days.

God points out that there is no way that a mortal person can hope to understand the mind, the plan, and the thoughts and feelings of the God who created the universe, the heaven and earth and everything upon and in them, so the discussion could never be on a level playing field in that sense. If we would only stop and think about the covenant with God, God agrees to take care of us if we but have faith in God and don't try to microscopically understand everything because we cannot hope to. God is "ineffable" and we are not. The penny drops for Job and in the passage for today he finally understands the enormity of his arrogance and his outward patina of faith – he was going through the motions without actually understanding what was basically required – and he now repents and is forgiven.

The reading from John deals with a discussion between a Pharisee called Nicodemus and Jesus. It's clear that Nicodemus has an enquiring mind and he is outwardly trying to reconcile his understanding of Jewish law with what Jesus is preaching. He comes to visit Jesus at night, so that suggests he doesn't want to be seen in public with Jesus at least by other Pharisees, but Jesus ignores this.

But the depth (or not) of his understanding becomes apparent when he opens the conversation by saying "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." This shows that he only accepts Jesus as being a divinely inspired teacher and not the Son of God. So Limited understanding and acceptance.

Jesus replies "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." This then puzzles Nicodemus further as he doesn't understand how anyone who is already alive can be born again? A very literal perspective. Jesus, patiently, says"

Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said unto you, You must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” But the penny hasn’t yet dropped as Nicodemus then says “How can these things be?”

Jesus then says “ Are you a teacher of Israel, And yet you do not understand these things? Very Truly I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

Jesus finishes off this “teaching “ by giving Nicodemus a frame of reference he should understand by saying “ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Once again we have a passage where the devout and learned person who thought they understood what God and Jesus were about, actually can’t see the wood for trees. Jesus is pointing out that we can’t understand the mind of God nor should we attempt to. It’s a question of faith and belief. God is “Ineffable” and we should accept that and not try to second guess God’s thoughts and actions any more than an ant or an amoeba can understand ours. The frames of reference are just too hugely different to begin with.

Psychologists have a word that is relevant here, it is “ Anthropomorphism”. It is where we ascribe human behaviours and

emotion to non-human beings in order to try to explain and account for their actions!! What we do know from repeated times in the scriptures Old and New is that God and his son Jesus do love us and that they feel sad and angry when we disobey the very simple rules they established as the covenant with us, but are happy when a sinner honestly repents and sins no more. To go further and try to understand the divine is not something given to many, they are blessed and fortunate. The rest of us need to remain constant in our belief in God and follow the teaching of his Son, Jesus and , just maybe, we might be also given a better understanding of God.

Learning and education do not miraculously give wisdom to anyone. They are building blocks along the way. It is said that it is only when you understand how little you know, that you begin the path to true wisdom. If only Job and Nicodemus had known this.

I close with three hymn tunes I can think of that covers this topic. Enjoy.

<https://youtu.be/AZA94ncis0g> - Immortal, Invisible, God only wise

<https://youtu.be/liuxet4pJ-c> - God is working his purpose out

<https://youtu.be/AzHL78CttDE> - God moves in a mysterious way