

Advent 2 sermon

In Roman-occupied Palestine during the 1st Century an extraordinary, shocking event happened that shook the Jewish faith to its foundations. It was a pivotal moment in the history of religion, and took place at the heart of the Holy Land.

Now if I ask you what it was I can well imagine you are thinking of the birth of Jesus Christ – which I'm not. What I am talking to you about actually took place 63 years ***before*** Jesus Christ was born, 63BC in other words, an event took place that was to shake the Jewish faith to its foundations.

We don't talk about this event so much these days, given what happened 63 years later with the birth of Christ, but I can promise that what I am about to tell you is of huge importance.

In that year a Roman consul called Pompey the Great, lay siege to the city of Jerusalem. After three months he eventually broke down the Jewish defences and entered the fortified walls surrounding its famous Temple

Pompey was curious about the strange religion of the people he had just vanquished, and naturally enough he wanted to enter the Temple. This is the same Temple that appears in the Bible, where Jesus casts out the moneylenders, the ancient heart of the Jewish faith.

The Jewish leaders considered it an act of unspeakable sacrilege that any Roman should enter this inner room of the Temple: not even ordinary Jews would be allowed in, only the high priest knew its secrets, and even he was allowed to enter just once a year. But all this was to change, as the Roman general walked in on his own and approached the part of the building known as the Holy of Holies. Even in a room as sacred as this it was hidden away behind a curtain.

Pompey was itching to know what central symbol stood at the heart of the Jewish faith. So he reached out and pulled back the curtain. And do you know what he found there, facing him?

Nothing. Behind the curtain was nothing at all. An earlier version of the Temple had contained the Ark of the Covenant. But that had been lost by the time Pompey walked in. There were and are no divine images in the Jewish faith. God was invisible and unseen. One of the 10 Commandments says directly: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.

In the beginning we were forbidden to visualise God, to depict God in any way. And that was of course one of the problems the Jewish Prophets faced when they had to say to their people that they had a message from God. There was no God and no image of God. The Prophets could speak of a voice waking them in the night, of a dream, of a burning bush, a vision. So the Prophetic message always was and still is a voice from the margins, from the unexpected, a sign that had to be interpreted. It

was quite hard to get other people to listen to you and believe you if you were a Prophet.

So that was the problem the Prophets faced. And it still is to a certain extent today a problem when it comes to us speaking about and explaining God.

There was a TV programme a few years ago on BBC Four which looked at Southwark Cathedral, our own mother church up by London Bridge. It was very good, but the one bit that was a bit awkward was when the interviewer asked both the dean and one of the canons to define what they meant by God.

It does seem like a very hard question in some ways. If asked you to define God, what would you come up with? Would you manage to be so articulate if there were a TV camera pointing at you? Would you do any better than the Prophets of the Jewish scriptures?

In fact it ought to be quite easy to answer this question, in Christianity at any rate, because we are the one religion in which God appears as a man. If you want to know what God is like, well he's here: Jesus Christ. It should actually be an easy question for us to answer, but even so it remains a problem for theologians and lay people alike.

One other clever way people have found of getting round this knotty problem is simply to say what God is not, to define him by negatives if you like.

I don't know if this has ever occurred to you but it's true, we often try to define God by what God isn't, rather than what God is. For example we call God immortal, which means he is 'not mortal', he will not die. We call him invisible, which means of course that he is NOT – visible. We call him ineffable, which means we can not speak about him. And we call him infinite, which means he is not bound in space and time.

This was and is of course the God behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies, the God that could not be represented in physical form. People have had to find ways of talking about God that paid respect to this seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the ordinary mundane world we know and see, and the divine eternal God uncreated in all time. It is difficult, and it is something to remember as we celebrate the Prophets today. In the Jewish Scriptures God was so hidden, so remote, so ineffable if you like, that in some passages they wouldn't even write God's name, but rather a set of letters YHWH, which was probably pronounced Yahweh.

So today we light our candle and remember the Old Testament prophets who foretold of Christ. They did not have the certainty we have of being able to point to Jesus Christ, but rather they had to witness as best they could to what they themselves experienced of the divine.

And of course I don't want to ruin the great anticipation of the Advent season when we are supposed to be waiting rather than celebrating, but all of this is answered in the person of Jesus Christ. In the end it turns out that our immortal, invisible,

ineffable and infinite God is actual mortal because he dies, he is visible because we can see him, he is effable, or rather we can talk about him because we do, and he is very finite because he is bound by the very real limitations of human flesh and blood and is constrained by being a real baby.

It's not always easy in religion to witness to the divine, as the Prophets alone remind us, but let us take confidence in the very real presence of Jesus Christ, as we gather now to celebrate him again in physical form by sharing the Communion that has been prepared for us by Alison.