

Sunday 18 February 2024, 1st Sunday of Lent, Parish Eucharist

Genesis 9.8-17

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Where is God? What is God doing right now? What is God thinking about? Does God care about me? Is God watching me? Does God love me?

If you're like me, you may find yourself asking one or more of these questions from time to time? They are fundamental questions about existence and meaning; they set us in the context of the universe and the One who made it. They are existential in the truest meaning of that word: they relate to why we exist and for what purpose (if any).

If I were to ask an average English churchgoer in 1450 these questions, I think they would probably tell me that God is in heaven (which is physically up there), ruling over the universe, thinking about every person and everything we do. God cares about our actions and wants us to follow the Commandments and to perform the various Corporal Works of Mercy (visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, and so on). God is watching and God does love me- but He expects me to behave.

I think I'd get a similar response from the average churchgoer in 1650, though they might add the qualifying statement that our works, no matter how many or well performed, cannot please God enough to warrant our salvation. God is watching from heaven. God cares about me and he cares about what I think of him. He expects me to behave but my behaviour does not buy his goodwill; Jesus' death on the cross did that.

In 1850 I expect the answer might not be too different from 1650 apart from a sense that physically 'up there' may not exactly describe where God is. Perhaps God is in my heart as much as 'in' heaven.

It would be pushing things a bit to anticipate what the average churchgoer of 2050 might say in answer to my questions, but I can assure you that between 1850 and 1950 there would have been a dramatic shift in the response to the questions 'Where is God? What is God doing right now? What is God thinking about? Does God care about me? Is God watching me? Does God love me?' Even if people's verbal answers remain similar, the way they think about God's place in the universe will have changed.

You may know for yourself how people around you in society answer questions about God's existence and God's involvement in human affairs. Often our answers as average churchgoers are not so different from theirs. 'Well, God isn't somewhere exactly; God is just everywhere. I don't know what God is doing, if he (is it he?) can he said to be doing anything. I'm not sure I believe God thinks about anything, really. Isn't God just sort of existing? I'd like to think God cares about

me but there are so many people and so many things going on in the world; why would God be interested? God isn't watching me, per se, and he probably understands when I bend the rules a bit. I'd like to believe God loves me but what is love anyway between a divine being and me?

If I have utterly failed to represent the contemporary response to questions about God, I am glad. But I'm pretty sure I've got at least some of it right. Over the last five centuries or so, we have largely lost the sense that God is present in the world, involved in its operations, concerned with our behaviour and its outcomes, and willing- let alone able- to love us in a recognisable way. God has gone from being literally up there to, effectively, nowhere we can interact with him (if it is a him).

Now, I have spent a lot of time setting up a problem. It's a theological problem, but more importantly it's a relational one. 'Does God care about me? Is God watching me? Does God love me?' These are some of the most important questions we can ask as human beings, let alone as Christians. How we answer them will determine not only how we feel about ourselves, but how we live our lives. The writer of Genesis recognised this. *I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.* Nature itself speaks about God's relationship with humanity- with you and with me. What we see and experience can tell us whether God cares, is watching, and loves. The rainbow reminds us of a God who is involved.

We have with us today a number of people who are about to begin Confirmation classes. They do so on the assumption that God is involved in their lives. They will be asking in what way, and to what conclusion, God is with them. Many of you, confirmed yourselves- some recently and some long ago- have asked these questions before. Over the course of Lent we have an opportunity to revisit both our questions and our answers, just as they will be doing together as groups of adults and children.

Let me urge you to begin with a charitable assumption. Assume that God is involved. Assume that you can discern God's work in your life and in the world around you. Assume that God is interested in you and loves you. And listen carefully to where those assumptions lead. I hope they lead our confirmands to repentance, amendment of life, growth in faith and understanding, and fresh ways of loving themselves and others. I hope they do the same for you.

We may not live in the universe as conceived by the average churchgoer in 1450 or even 1850. But I hope we are not so jaded as to see the universe of today as more fitting a place for us and for our children. The faith of our fathers was often simple but it was real faith, and not simply doubt masquerading as piety. *I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.* I am here. I am reigning supreme over all things. I am overseeing my creation with care and good intent. I care about you. I am watching over you. I love you. This is the Christian understanding of God and it is a good now- good for us and for our world- as it ever was in the past. Our existential questions are not new. And neither are their answers. Amen.