

Sermon Sunday 22 September 2013
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Administrator of the Diocese of Newcastle

I am really pleased to be with you this evening to enjoy this service of Evensong. It is the service through which I came to fuller faith and journeyed into Anglicanism. It is also a privilege to be with you as we dedicate the new Rectory to God. It has been quite a journey to reach this point and I commend all who have been part of the decision-making, building and decorating work.

One of the questions we face on such occasions is, "Why do you bother?" We have around us people who do not affirm the existence of God and the ministry of the church and cannot comprehend why we would go to such effort. I want to explore this question this evening by affirming the reality of God, the Divine Impulse and our place in God's work.

When the coin is tossed or a wager is made you and I are people who will place our bet on the side of God. We are people who, in the face of agnosticism, atheism and ambivalence, will answer with the word, 'Yes'. Sometimes our answer will be tentative because some circumstance has tested our believing but more often we will say 'Yes' with assurance, boldness and confidence.

We come to this time and this place as people who have sensed the Divine Impulse and experienced the divine story in such a way as to point us to God. We come as successors of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Matthew, St Paul, St Peter, St Mary McKillop giving our physical and emotional resources to God, seeking to honour him with our lips and with our lives. The movement of God has captured our imagination such that we are prepared to respond to him and give to his work.

Yet, one of the realities we face as people of faith is that in our community there is a growing number of people who think like the English atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell who held the view that there is *"No reason to believe any of the dogmas of traditional theology and, further, that there is no reasons to wish that they were true. Man, in so far as he is not subject to natural forces, is free to work out his own destiny. The responsibility is his, and so is the opportunity."* (<http://www.personal.kent.edu/~rmuhamma/Philosophy/RBwritings/isThereGod.htm>) In summary, Russell is saying, 'There is no God and it is all up to us.'

As people touched with the Divine Impulse we find ourselves unable to accept this conclusion and find it unsatisfactory even if the dogmas and behaviours of institutional religions also affront or confuse us. We look for ways of explaining our views to others.

One of a number of alternative philosophical positions to Russell's is that where there is design there must be a designer and in the universe there is design so there must be a universal designer. From this stance the intricacies of the human brain and the wonder of the conditions in which life emerged become the basis for further exploration. We ponder, if there is a Universal Designer, what is its form and how is its work done. Our simple openness to this possibility compels us to explore further and ponder what people have posited through the ages. The Divine Impulse meets a conversation in human reason and we discover an openness to the possibility of God.

Just a few moments think this way points us to one of our responsibilities that is, to find ways of speaking of God such that others might consider the same quest. To interrupt the ordinary flow of conversation or to speak when the conversation is interrupted about the rational possibility of God. To speak of God as a rational not simply an emotional worldview. To engage our buildings, websites, publications and ministries in the same work. To proclaim God to a world that believes there is no need of hearing.

This has become all the harder because religious communities are increasingly disconnected from their wider communities. Fewer people look for religious comfort or support during life's transitions of birth, marriage or death. If we stay in our small corner people will stay in theirs and we won't talk to each other! The risk of this approach is that we live in a world where the sense of transcendence is being lost and the value of creation, especially humanity, is being diminished. The democratic voice which looks for a narrow majority sidelines religion, religious values and religious behaviour. We get set on a trajectory of a minority becoming increasingly marginalised.

Yet, a Divine Impulse remains. When we speak to people about love, beauty, compassion, empathy and hope they have a sense of what we mean. These themes can point us to something deeper - that we exist beyond chance or simply for ourselves - that there is a created or designed purpose which invites us to engage that which is deeper.

If we can start such a conversation or keep it alive we can help a person or community identify the Divine Impulse in their lives, to at least ask the question, 'Might that thought, that idea, that feeling, that aspiration, that remembering be a work of God?'

If or when there is openness we can speak of God as we have come to know God, speaking of God amongst us in Jesus Christ. We turn to the scriptures to tell the tale of God and humanity - always wanting to point to God's loving purpose and character. We can speak of how to know God deeper in worship, prayer and sacrament. As we do this we recognise that our buildings, our customs, our books, our rituals are a whole new language which take a lot of time to learn and require a high degree of motivation and companionship to learn it. Staying without belief will feel easier. The demands of belief may seem too daunting.

We want people to recognise the Divine Impulse and know it more - to know God in their lives and to find the courage to respond to God.

Richard Swinburne in his book *Is there a God?* offers two key thoughts - *God is responsible for the existence of everything besides himself and for it being as it is and having the capacities it has; by his continual action at each moment of time (p 18) and If you accept [there is God], it follows that you have certain duties. God has given us life and the good things it contains, including above all the opportunities to mould our characters and help others. Great gratitude to God is abundantly appropriate. We should express it in worship and in helping forward his purposes (p123).*

When asked if we accept there is a God we say 'yes' with boldness and confidence and we yearn for others to do the same - to know God and make him known. All of our endeavours as church are dedicated to this purpose.