

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Luke 14:1,7-14

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The last God

Not for the first time, God has a grievance against the people of Israel. In the turmoil of ancient near-Eastern politics that would, within a generation, see Jerusalem overthrown by the empire of Babylon and its temple destroyed, God outlines his complaint against his people.

Basically it amounts to this: God has chosen and cared for Israel, rescued and protected them, and they have shown precious little gratitude. In fact their response to God's grace and goodness has been to turn away from him and to follow other gods – many other gods. And having sown the wind they will soon reap the whirlwind:

‘Has a nation changed its gods,
Even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit.’

In other words, called to serve and worship the one true God, they have been promiscuous in their devotions, multiplying and proliferating the one God into the many.

Well, reading this passage I was reminded of a current argument for atheism that I have heard recently, including from perhaps the best known atheist of our times, Richard Dawkins. The argument that they present is simple: over the centuries the human race has worshipped a multitude of gods: someone has estimated that over 10,000 years human beings have followed 10,000 religions involving around 1000 gods. But we no longer believe in the vast majority of those. We no longer believe in Zeus or Apollo or Baal or Amen-Ra, or Isis or Mithra. We have jettisoned the vast bulk of our deities, acknowledging them as human fabrications. So why not just go the whole hog and get rid of them all: in the case of Christians do away with the last survivor, the God of the bible. Here is a kind of reversal of Jeremiah's complaint: where he accuses Israel of multiplying their gods, proliferating their divinities, the argument here is the opposite: that we should take the last step: from the many, to the one – to none at all.

Well, that might seem simple enough but I would suggest that there is a qualitative difference between worshipping one God, and

worshipping none – and I would want to focus on what continuing to worship one God does to us as human beings. Basically, as long as there is God there is one before whom we bow, and I would suggest that this is essential to our humanity. Human beings have not been created to be masters of the world; we are not made to be simply the pinnacle of evolution and therefore accountable to no-one but ourselves. We have not been made to inhabit a world in which we are to imagine ‘above us only sky’ as John Lennon put it. We have been made for God. We have been made for One above and beyond us – and we are never more exalted than when we are on our knees before our Creator; never more dignified than when our spirits are humbled before the mystery that is God; never more human than when our heads are bowed before the transcendence of the living God.

Now, to many that will seem way too submissive – and an affront to our humanity. To some this is precisely what keeps the human race in a state of infancy. Human beings, we are told, have to grow up and to stop kowtowing to a God and a power beyond us. Well, two things must be said about that. Firstly, when we learn to bow before God, it makes us wary of bowing to anyone or anything else. The problem with rejecting God is that it does not set us free from captivity as promised. It just means that we are ensnared by a host of other gods instead: gods of power over others, gods of greed and consumption, gods of wealth and mammon. Throwing God away does not cure us of our subservience and captivity to powers beyond us. We just honour lesser gods. To acknowledge the living God, on the other hand, is the first act of subversion of every other lord or power that would threaten and ensnare us.

Secondly, however, we must acknowledge that to bow before God does not necessarily enhance our wellbeing and dignity. Too often religion is oppressive and demeaning. Our God, of course, can be a tyrant. But think for a moment of our reading from Luke’s Gospel this morning and the God glimpsed there. Yes, Jesus warns us there against having a false sense of our own importance, our own superiority, our own power. At a wedding banquet, he says, do not sit in the place of honour but rather acknowledge your littleness. Have some humility. Learn your

place before God – because then look what happens. God takes you and raises you and honours you as his guest at the banquet.

You see these are the dynamics of our faith. The God before whom we humble ourselves is the God who exalts us. The God before whom we bow is the God who raises our heads and tells us to look up. The Lord who we honour is the one in whom our honour is restored.

So come to this table this morning with spirits bowed. Come to this God who remains when all the other thousands of gods have been banished and disowned. Come to the God who, in the words of our reading from Jeremiah, brings us ‘into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things.’ Come with empty hands, to receive, recognising your needs and your place before your Maker. Come with a humble spirit. And here let God raise you to that place of honour where no one or nothing can ever diminish you, or dishonour you, or belittle you. This is the Gospel. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
the heavens proclaim your glory,
all that you have made resounds to your praise
and bears witness to your greatness, your majesty.

All things praise you, Maker of all.

And we, little creatures, come before you.

We, mere humans, mere dust,

mere children of the earth

come into your presence,

and we are bowed and humbled before you.

And we are further humbled because we come

knowing that our lives are not

as you would want them to be;

that we fail and offend and fall far short

of your purposes for us.

And we confess that we have turned away from you

despite all that you have done for us,

and we come with contrite hearts.

Yet this is what we find.

We find a table spread for us.

We find bread and wine and an invitation.

We find you, waiting for us,

greeting us with outstretched arms,

honouring us as your beloved children.

So bless us here in our worship.

Feed us, nourish us, and send us out

in the power of your Spirit.

We pray in Jesus' name and in his words

we pray together, saying...