

A Questioning God

Readings: Job, chapter 38, verses 1 – 11; Luke chapter 12, verses 13 – 21

One of the most infuriating things about some parsons is that you never get a straight answer out of them. Ask a question and all you get is a counter-question. You would be even more infuriated if you knew that they did it on purpose.

And they are in good company. Jesus did it. In our reading today someone asks Jesus to adjudicate in a dispute. Jesus' answer? "Who made me a judge over you?". When a lawyer asked him to define who is my neighbour Jesus replies by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. And so it goes on.

If you read the Bible as a whole then the God who emerges out of it is a Questioning God. When Adam and Eve hide from God in the garden we read that God comes down and calls out "Adam, where are you?! — as if he didn't know! At the other end of the Old Testament we have the story of Job who cries out to God for an answer to the injustices which have plagued his life. And, when eventually God does answer, it is to ask Job a series of unanswerable questions. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Who determined its measurements?" Job wants an answer. All he gets is one question after another.

A questioning God. That's not what we want or expect. Christians have been brought up to assume that God is a problem-solving God; and we have been taught to go to the Bible for answers to all our questions. The result is that we treat the Bible like one of those manuals that come with a new dishwasher – at the back there is always a section headed *Trouble-shooting* and a directive as to what to do. We regard the Bible in the same way. Some Bibles have a section called "What to do if..." and what follows is a series of appropriate texts. QED.

We have got it wrong. God is not a problem-solving God. Nor is there a Bible text to solve every problem or answer every question. The fact is that God is a Questioning God who demands answers from us. And for good reasons.

1. One is related to the question of Truth. And the only kind of Truth which is really compelling is the Truth that we discover and accept for ourselves. It is one thing to be told that something is true by someone in authority; it is another thing to experience that truth for ourselves. Truth, if it is to have any real meaning or power to convince must authenticate itself in our own experience; it must be personal, not propositional.

By way of illustration. On my way to Letchworth there are any number of 30 mph signs and there are speed cameras to back them up. Those signs are authoritative but they have no power of themselves to control my speed — especially if the road is empty. But if I am trapped by one of those cameras and fined £60, then all of a sudden I find that I comply with the 30mph restriction. The truth of the speed limit is no longer merely academic. It has been authenticated in my own experience and it matters.

So it is with God's Truth. We crave for an authoritative answer to our questions and so we take refuge in the authority of an infallible Pope or an infallible Bible. But when push comes to shove no authority is meaningful until and unless we perceive it to be true in our experience and it becomes personal.

2. A second reason why God keeps on questioning us is because in answering Him we become involved in the answer. The question sets up a relationship and out of that relationship we discover the Truth for ourselves.

The classic example is the question Jesus asked of His disciples at the turning point in His ministry. Jesus began by asking them, "Who do men say that I am?". That was easy and they piled in with

their answers — some say Elijah, others John the Baptist, others say a Prophet. It was all very hearsay and academic. Then came the crunch question. “But who do you say that I am?” And the answer to that question involved them in a commitment which changed the course of their lives. “You are the Christ” said Peter. There was nothing merely academic about that answer. To say that meant following the Christ to crucifixion and beyond that to resurrection and only after that did they really know what it meant to say “You are the Christ”. Jesus’ question set up a relationship, it involved them in a new way of living and a new way of thinking. It was out of that experience of following the Christ through crucifixion and resurrection that they came to know the truth of who he was.

3. A third reason why God simply questions us is because He wants us to become responsible and mature people. Simply doing what we are told, by some external authority (be it Church or Bible) does not inculcate responsibility.

Adolf Eichmann exterminated a million Jews in the gas chambers of a concentration camp. And when brought to trial, he pleaded that he was simply following orders. Not my fault Guv, I was doing what I was told!

But God does not allow us that kind of evasion of responsibility. Which is why He asks questions of us rather than issuing commands and directives. In answering the question we have to take responsibility for the answer we give and there can be no hiding place.

That’s not what we want. Far better to have someone tell us what to believe and what to do — because if it turns out wrong we can always excuse ourselves on the ground that it wasn’t our responsibility. Ultimately that doesn’t wash. God requires of us that we become mature and responsible people and God enables that to happen — by asking us questions rather than supplying us with ready-made answers.

It is in the answering that we discover the Truth for ourselves; it is in the answering that we experience the Truth for ourselves; and it is in the answering that we become both mature and responsible. Which is what God wants us to be.