

Gingins, Holy Communion

Sun 1st March 2026, 16h

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Genesis 12.1-4a

John 3.1-17

Meeting God in the other

- How tribal are you ? Do any of you support a football team (hands up) ? - which ? 😊
 - They can get pretty tribal - 'I belong here and they (the others) are the enemy'
 - Genève Servette supporters got up to tribal mischief in Lausanne recently - trains were brought to a standstill
 - I was at a Liverpool match with my son - fans started singing 'Stand up if you hate Manchester United' - I remember thinking 'I don't hate them' - so I didn't stand up - maybe I lack that tribal gene - maybe you'll tell me 'chill out, don't be so pedantic, just join in the banter' - but I couldn't
 - Or what about mobile phones ? - my son told me I should use that example to demonstrate that even at the somewhat mature age of 64, I can still communicate with a hint of a funky vibe - (oh dear, sounds pathetic doesn't it 😊)... very sad dad
- Hands up if you have an iPhone - hands up if you have an Android - I'm thinking maybe we should have all iPhone users on the right, and Android on the left - or do that for the Psalm responses - iPhones do the odd numbered verses, Androids the even verses ... 😊
 - What about when it comes to religion and spirituality - are you a bit 'us and them', or not ?
 - We all put labels on ourselves, on others, as a means to protect our identity, or for convenience, or as a shorthand way to decide how to relate to others ... and that is all the more the case in these polarised times of conflict and crisis : labels appear
 - So let's look at our Bible readings - we begin this week with Abraham, and God's promise to him of a special future for his people ... and that, again, is highly topical given this latest conflict raging even as I speak
 - I have been reflecting on this recently as I remade contact with a childhood friend - that friend has married into a Jewish community, and now identifies strongly with that community - finding

wisdom, warmth, humour, kindness, belonging, sense of identity, and emotional security - and it was evident she also felt an historical sense of being marginalised and victimised (with reason of course)

- It's early days, so I've not yet got to the point of being able to have a conversation about that question of identity - or victimhood vis à vis the 'other' and the kind of reaction or over-reaction which that drives - there is some psychology there (experts could explain) - the psychology of victim-persecutor - and of course it's very delicate to talk about given the terrible things going on in Gaza, and now as well with the latest conflict ... but perhaps there is a conversation to be had, all in the context of friendship, about tribes and labels and the current context ...
- But one thing that is important in such a conversation is to insist that - 'we may wear our labels, but *above all we are human beings*, children of God, the same, you are you and I am me' - 'I may wear the label of Christian/Jew/Muslim/whatever, but *above all I am a human being, I am me*' - 'I may wear label British/Swiss/French but *above all I am a human being, I am me*' - I may wear a label 'male' and self-identify as 'he/him' but *above all I am a human being, I am me* ... so please relate to me as me, not as a representative of some label or

tribe about which you may have preconceived notions

- The basis of all of our identities is that of shared humanity - and we must turn constantly to that - all the more so in these challenging times
- Abraham is promised a special future for his people - and yet the whole of the biblical narrative is one of moving away from this narrow understanding of God as a tribal deity - opening up a more universal and generous vision, embracing all of humanity, in fact all of creation
- In our readings we then hear about Nicodemus, who has come to meet Jesus - He is steeped in the Abrahamic tradition. He's a deeply intelligent person, scholar - but let's not label him - he's a human being - he has been thinking about what Jesus says about being 'born again' and wants to know « how does it all work ? » - 'can you kind of go back inside ?' - I resonate with that - my original professional background was in engineering and the engineer in me wants to know how it works - but the anti-engineer is secretly delighted that Jesus doesn't provide a blueprint, a workplan ... because Truth is not like that ...

- Jesus's words in reply form part of the classic repertoire of Gospel sayings - be 'born again' - culminating in the verse John 3:16 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son' that you still see on posters every so often ...
- These are powerful verses - but these too have been used by many - in a Christian tribal way - as a means to define people in terms of their faith identity : are you 'born again' or not ? - in some traditions, unless you've had a powerful conversion experience then you've not really encountered Jesus - not very encouraging for those of us whose spiritual journey has been a gradual one of exploration, questions, doubts, discovery, and more questions
- 'God so loved the world ... that whoever believes in him shall ... have eternal life' - the Christian tribal approach says : Do you 'believe in Jesus' or not ? - if you don't, and you don't sign up to our version of that orthodoxy, you are on the outside - too bad, you don't make the cut, your not part of our tribe - the Christian community, or the church, can look like a closed tribe to those who are not familiar with it
- Yet Jesus's answers to Nicodemus are deliberately teasing, exploratory, enigmatic, mystical - '*the wind blows where it wills ...*' - I love that verse - don't try to understand how it all works - don't

try to dissect, define and pin down - don't stay within your categories - simply open yourself to these mysteries, and be ready to discover things you never expected, in places which will surprise you

- the Truth is not in dogma but is more universal, found in the journey, part of shared human experience - a generous vision
- Nicodemus asks questions, and that is the hallmark of spirituality, not in confident, formulaic answers - hence why Jesus's replies are enigmatic, not to be treated as a neat package of prescriptive doctrine, but as an invitation to keep exploring - we meet God in seeking, asking questions, here in the known, there in 'the other' - *we seek it here, we seek it there, the Truth we seek it everywhere*
- That mysticism finds echoes in many faith traditions and worldviews - we can be open to those - do you know the books of Elif Shafak (Turkish/British writer) ? - {hold up book} - I have recently been discovering them - bridge between western 'European' worldview and the fascinating spirituality and culture of the ancient Middle-East, with its Islamic tradition - her book 'The 40 Rules of Love' is based around the thoughts of the Sufi writer Shams of Tabriz in the 13th century

- he wrote many things which resonate with Jesus's exploratory, enigmatic words
 - He writes *'Remember, it falls upon each of us to discover the divine spirit inside and live by it.'* - or again *'your heart needs to be as soft as a feather ... The only way to get closer to Truth is to expand your heart so that it will encompass all humanity and still have room for more'*
 - The Spirit is at work in places we might not expect : the wind blows where it wills.
 - So we derive our identity and security not from the certainties of our own 'tribe' but from the knowledge (the silent certainty within) that we are deeply precious - just as we are - to a loving and gracious God - I am me, just as I am
 - And we explore the implications ...
 - For **the World collectively**, for geo-politics as the world risks retreating into national and cultural tribes, and building walls of fear and mistrust - to challenge the tribalism which we see all around us, increasingly - in movements scape-goating others (migrants, whoever) - in defining identity within protected borders, and so on ... in making
- 'us' great rather than seeking the common good of the whole of humanity and the well-being of this global village
 - I've recently taken on a role representing the global Anglican Communion at the UN in Geneva, and as part of that I've been drafting some words which can be jointly signed by the leaders of the Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed global communions - that represents some 200 million people - speaking into the current context of heightened tension, turbulence and mistrust, and the undermining of the mechanisms of international cooperation
 - It's still a work in progress, but a key element to this is the call to work together on the basis of shared human values and shared humanity, echoing the words of Pope Leo calling for *'... more humane relations between States ... based on mutual trust, sincerity in negotiations and the faithful fulfilment of obligations ... the strengthening of supranational institutions and multilateral dialogue, not their delegitimization ... justice and human dignity amid global power imbalances ... encouraging every spiritual, cultural and political initiative that counters the spread of fatalism and keeps hope alive'*
 - 'spiritual initiatives that counter fatalism and keep hope alive' : that's us, here, today

- So we are called to do this together, as the whole of humanity - let us not retreat into our tribes and put up walls
 - And for us **individually**, if we feel an element of needing to protect our own fragile individual identity by hiding in our tribe because we feel vulnerable or threatened - to reflect on that - not to assume the posture of victim - but return to a posture of hope, generosity and trust in the goodness of God and of human experience - and let that lead us forward ...
 - And above all, each of us, allowing this to prompt us towards a generous, non-dogmatic spirituality - to be free to be ourselves and to explore, to meet God in the known but also to be surprised, meeting God where we perhaps least expect it, and perhaps (you never know) in 'the other' ...
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