

Behind the Waterfall – The Invisible Thread

Acts 8:26-38 / Colossians 4:2-6

Questions and Mysteries

About 18 months back we went to see Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Obviously it was brilliant(!) and we were quite near the front so the flying car soared out above us you'd expect to be able to see how it was done. In fact, you could just about see this huge and immensely strong hinged metal arm which held it up and foisted it forward – but amazingly, only just. The contraption was almost invisible, and had we been further back would be impossible to make out, so I guess there must have been hundreds of adults and children during that run asking questions of how it was done.

The Old Testament also raises questions, and although for Jews these books comprise the totality of their Scriptures, as Christians we realise that Jesus is the answer. When I was at school we used to have a maths book with answers in the back. It was very difficult not to turn to them and adjust what you'd put so as to get a tick! And in some ways the Bible is like that – Jesus and the New Testament is the answer pages. Or some people liken the Bible to a play with two acts: act one is completely valid in itself, but act two brings it to completion and reveals the mysteries that otherwise remain.

The Meaning of Mystery

In fact, “mystery” is a very apt word. We tend to think of “mystery” as meaning something that still baffles us, but to Paul and the New Testament writers it means almost the opposite: a mystery in Greek culture was something which *had* been hidden but was *now* revealed. So in second reading Paul talks about “proclaiming the mystery of Christ” (Col:2:3) and in the Church liturgy the priest sometimes says, “*Let us proclaim the mystery of faith*”. I used to think “what good will that do anyone?” - to proclaim a mystery that no-one can understand(!) - until I realised it *means* “let us proclaim that which, until Christ, was hidden but is now revealed for all to understand.”

In this sermon therefore I want to highlight some of these Old Testament mysteries which the New Testament brings to fulness in Jesus.

The Mystery of God.

For the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible God speaks as a plurality: **“Let us make human beings in our own image.”** (Genesis 1:26) What does this mean when time and again the Bible will reiterate that there is only *one* God? Is it the “royal we” - the plural of majesty? Or perhaps it's the plural of mystery – mystery awaiting revelation. In the same way, the word “God” when referring to the Lord, is always in the plural: “Elohim” rather than “Eloah”; and the word “Lord”, “Adonai” when referring to God, is also nearly always in the plural.

One of the most striking examples of this is Deuteronomy 6:4 where God says, **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one Lord!”** No-where is there a greater emphasis on the one-ness of God, yet even here the word for God is used in the plural – Elohim – as it is on some 4000 other occasions. And the word translated here **“one”** “echad” (“the Lord is one”) actually emphasises the unity of several rather than a sense of a single unit.

You may say that I'm picking up on details of grammar, but there are lots of other examples of this mysterious way to speaking. And they'd remain mysterious except for Jesus who said, **“I and the Father are one”** (John 10:30) **“If you have seen me you have seen the Father”** (John 14:9) or in John 5 - **“the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does... For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.”** (John 5:19-21)

Jesus makes sense of the mystery. When we proclaim Jesus as the Lord – God – we reveal a mystery hidden for ages – the mystery of God. All over the world, with the exception of Islam, natural religion instinctively imagines many gods. This instinct is a mystery when logic dictates “one” God. Yet in Jesus and the Spirit, the revelation of God as three persons in one unity, have the unique explanation.

So firstly there's the mystery of God.

The Mystery of Kingship.

The story of kingship in the Old Testament is a chequered one. As I said last week, Israel was originally twelve tribes from twelve brothers – they were a bit like the United States – a federal republic governed not by a king and his dynasty, but a judge. But the period of the judges was bit and miss and in the last five chapters of that book the people cry for monarchy five times.

The kings they get, of course, are variable. From Saul, through David and Solomon, to Rheoboam, Hoshea and Zedekiah, each was a disappointment in some way or other. At each coronation the ideals of kingship were held up but less and less were they adhered to. Gradually the call for monarchy became a cry for Messiah. But what would this messiah look like? Many people wanted another powerful king to bring back the glory days, but the prophets spoke of one who would rule the world with justice and peace, whose government would increase, and who would know God as Son to a Father. Clearly this Messiah was going to no ordinary king and his rule would be of different order to that of this world.

Questioned before Pontius Pilate Jesus said, **“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest.”** (Jn 18:32) He spoke of kingdom but did nothing to kick out the Romans. Yet at the same time he drew complete allegiance from Jews, Greeks, Romans, patriots, collaborators, men and women.

They bowed down to him; they worshiped him; they searched the scriptures and realised he was the Saviour because regardless of national boundaries and political aspirations he delivered them all to live together in a new way - *from* all nations as one people. At last the mystery of true kingship was revealed – not through strength of sin-tainted domination but the serving of Spirit-filled dominion. This king of kings is also the prince of peace, and in a world of bloodshed and violence how much we need him.

The Mystery of Sacrifice.

Sacrifice pervades Old Testament worship from the earliest times. Partly it was an act of devotion – worship pure and simple, a gift for the god up there who would smell the fragrant smoke and be pleased with the gift. Much later it would also be seen as an act of obedience – the fulfillment of a godly life. And at some point, enshrined in the Law of Moses, it became an act of atonement, dealing with sin.

Sin was seen as a personal act – we sin as individuals by what we think, say or do, and also by what fail to do or say, or think. But throughout the Old Testament, sin has consequences for the whole community. One scholar says, *“A transgression, any act needing atonement, would set in motion some of this evil which if not neutralised by atonement, would eventually set loose its destructive force on the land and it's people.”* (Robert J. Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*, p.26)

When a person came to offer sacrifice, they placed their hand on top of the animal about to be slaughtered, as they presented it before the priest. What they were saying was “My sin is upon this animal.

Although I am responsible for my sin, Lord, I cannot afford to pay the price. My sin brings death, but I cannot die and go on living at the same time. Lord, please accept this animal to cover the sin I've committed." You may have heard of the Jewish festival Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – and kippur literally means covering – to cover debt, or to cover our sins.

The notion of atoning sacrifice was based on ancient law: an eye for an eye, a life for a life, yet at the same it seemed to go against that law by suggesting an animal's life could be substituted for my life. So the question of how human sin can ever be fully dealt with is left unresolved by the Old Testament. Once again, Jesus provides both fulfillment and answer. He said of himself, "**The son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.**"(Mk 10:45) or again, "**unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it produces many seeds.**" (Jn.12:24) Jesus saw his death as central to his mission. He saw his death as sacrificial and beneficial to others. Studies have shown he clearly aligned himself with the character of the Suffering Servant in the prophecy of Isaiah, who was pictured as a lamb going to slaughter. John the Baptist pointed to him as the "**Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.**" (Jn 1:29)

Our second reading described an Ethiopian visitor to Jerusalem reading from Isaiah 53 and wondering who this picture of the sacrificial lamb referred to. Philip the apostle explains how it pointed all the time to Jesus who give his life for the sins of all humanity. The Ethiopian, not a Jew, is baptised into the name of the Jewish Messiah. Through this self-sacrifice, the Messiah and King of Israel becomes Saviour and King of all the world.

All these points are connecting together as they find their goal in Jesus. The mystery of Godhead: what is God really like? The mystery of kingship: what does God's rule really look like? The mystery of sacrifice: not something extracted to appease a bloodthirsty god, but something offered by a loving God and servant King.

The Mystery of Victory.

Reading the psalms is like reading a person's diary – they're full of contrasting emotions. On one page the soul is cast down, on the next we have a song of high victory. One of the mysteries of the Old Testament is the question of why our victories are so transient. Time and again our worse nature – our sin if you like – gets the better of us and pulls us down. The Old Testament does look forward to a final victory, but every attempt to get there throughout the book ends in tears.

Throughout his letters, St Paul turned this question over, when he wrote to the Colossians he showed how Jesus defeated sin by using different weapons. Sin uses the weapons of violence and destruction, but Jesus used the weapons of love and self-offering. So Paul writes, **“God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in Christ, and through him to reconcile all things to himself, ... making peace through his blood shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God... but now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight... Having disarmed the powers and authorities he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”** (Col. 1:19-22, 2:15)

You can see there the mystery of God working with Christ; you can see the mystery of Christ the King, giving himself as a servant; you can see the mystery of sacrifice finding fruition in Christ's self-offering that makes peace, covers our sins and presents us holy; and you can see how these strategies completely disarm the powers of evil. The very use of their weapons – the violence that nailed Jesus to the tree – plays right into the hands of our loving, self-giving God. So Paul writes in another letter, possibly quoting from an early Christian hymn, **“Therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above all other names.”** (Phil. 2:9) Through cross and resurrection the true victory of God is fully revealed.

But of course, we still live in a broken, sin-ridden world. We still look forward to the final consummation and the final victory. Just as the Jews still look for the Messiah we still wait for the Second coming of Christ – so what's the difference?

The difference is Jesus is alive. He's been raised from the dead, decisively bringing a new factor into the equation; he's present with us and pours his Holy Spirit into us, filling us with a new hope, and one which ties us to the future. Therefore we *know* sin was defeated on the cross and we *know* victory is breaking in. And so we have faith that the final mystery is also being revealed: *the mystery of human destiny*.

The Mystery of Human Destiny

What was this world made for? What are you and I here for? In the beginning it all seemed so good, then everything seemed to go downhill. What evidence is there for hope? The mystery of the Old Testament is that hopes are held out only to be dashed. But we have Jesus. In Jesus, not only God is revealed, but also God's intention for human living. That's why Paul says in his letter to the Colossians, **“The glorious riches of this mystery is made known – Christ in you, the hope of glory.”** (Col. 1:27) This is how Jesus

really changes our lives – by pouring into his Holy Spirit: **“Christ in you.”**

So let me ask, in closing, “Is Christ *in* you?” Is Jesus in your heart, your mind, your will, your soul, your strength? Because in Jesus every mystery is being revealed.