

## Transfiguration 2

Apparently, Baptists have an awful tendency to begin every sermon with a joke. So here's a joke – although I hope nobody finds it funny. This is a joke that people out there tell about the Christian God. It's an old joke, centuries old, but every day it's revived and put into new clothes. Today the joke would go something like this:

A man walks down the street, with his son, in Kenya, and is hacked to death by a mob wielding machetes. Meanwhile, Christians who believe that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, are in church hearing a reading about a mountain top experience. Surely, it shows that the Christian God is either non-existent, powerless or immoral. Try fitting that 'trilemma' into the Alpha Course.

What does Christian worship have to do with real life? What does this mountain-top experience we read of in the Gospels have to do with those down below? We need to go all the way back to creation to get to grips with this tension.

The creation story that we read of in Genesis, amongst other things, is a political response to the dominant creation story of the day – you can still read about this in surviving documents, printed by Penguin. The story is called *Enuma Elish*. In the beginning, two gods – Tiamat and Apsu – are gods of chaos, and would like a bit of order. So they create God's of order – then regret it, and try to kill them. In the ensuing battle, Marduk – newly acclaimed king of the Gods, slays Tiamat. The world is created from Tiamat's dead body, and humans are made from the blood of Tiamat's defence secretary – they are created as slaves to the gods of order.

The Genesis accounts, far more beautiful in their simplicity, tell a different story. They tell of a God who stoops tenderly to his creation, of an ideal state of harmony between God and creatures, a state which is lost when Adam's relation with God is severed. Unlike the Babylonian myth, which says the basic state of human life is violence – Genesis reveals a deeper truth – that the pre-basic state is one of harmony.

If we fast forward from here, to the wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the Christian factions that ripped Europe apart. So religion was privatised, spiritualised into the privacy of the upper room out of public sight, promoted to the house of Lords where it can do no harm. Religion is your private business, it has little to do with public political life. But what are you left with once God has been bracketed out of real life?

You are left with Leviathan – the awful sea monster from the deep that we read of in Job, in the Psalms, in Isaiah. But also the name of a book by the 17<sup>th</sup> Century writer, Thomas Hobbes. From here on, the social contract came to define politics as we know it in the West. Politics is no longer based upon the ideal of a good creation from which we have fallen. But the belief was that might is right – everyone is scared of death, so we need a strong central government to protect me and my rights from any who would threaten it. The human state of nature is dog eat dog, and goodness me, once God has been privatised, who will protect me in real life. Er – quick – a social contract to keep us all safe. Well, at least to protect my interests, and my property. Human beings become privatised, which puts us at odds with every other human being.

And before you know it a whole way of life developed where it was believed that the basic human being is an individual, and any communities to which we belong are secondary. No

longer was there any conception of belonging to a body, that would shape our identity. Instead, it is us as individuals who join bodies for our own benefit. The bloodshed we see in Kenya, according to modern politics, is the best that we can hope for.

And what we celebrate at communion – is not being part of a group we have decided to join to help our individual life or give us a free ticket to heaven. At communion we celebrate that our identity is not to be found in isolation from others, who remain secondary to me. At communion we root our identity in the body of Christ, and our individual gifts and life are energised and driven by our being in Christ in this way. This meal says that the true state of humanity is communion – with one another and with God. It is a political act that undermines the legitimacy of modern politics with its foundations in individualism. Here, we encounter Christ. Here at this meal, we glimpse something of what Peter, James and John had glimpsed on the mount of transfiguration... Or do we?