

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Epiphany 3

23 January 2022

“Encountering God”

Readings: Nehemiah 8.1–3, 5–6, 8–10; Psalm 19;
1 Corinthians 12.12–31; Luke 4.14–21.

Where might we encounter God? Let me offer you four ways.

God In Nature

It was at the end of an Army exercise in the Northern Territory, and I was located with my unit near the Tyndall Airbase at Katherine. It was a terrible place; hot, dry, dusty, and fly-blown, with the added misery of having been recently burnt out. There was blackened stubble on the ground and skeletons of burnt scrub all around.

I was taking a church service and had prepared a sermon on the topic of how we encounter God. One line went: “for many people, the grandeur of God can be seen in the beauty of nature that lies around us”, and with a sweep of my hand we all looked at the local devastation, while one wag said: “But perhaps not in this place, Padre!” All laughed, and I thought he had made a good point.

On reflection, however, one of the miracles of the Australian bush is its capacity to regenerate after fire and grow back stronger than before. I am reminded of it when driving through the Blue Mountains and seeing how quickly the forest has returned after the destruction of the 2020 fires – only two years ago. Rebirth and renewal are signs of God’s creative presence – of resurrection, if you like.

The beauty, complexity and power of creation therefore says something about the creator behind it. As the Psalmist wrote:

*The heavens declare the glory of God:
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.* (Psalm 19: 1)

Nature is caught up in God and the natural laws reflect the Creator’s capacity to bring forth life and order from chaos. It is for this reason that both scientific investigation and protection of the environment is part of our spiritual work.

Happily, the study of nature has revealed to humanity many of its operational mysteries that were hidden to previous generations, and has brought many blessings such as vaccines and the capacity to produce food; but these achievements are not without a consequent requirement to be responsible.

God In the Word

The thirteenth century theologian Thomas Aquinas identified two ways by which humanity can encounter God. He called them ‘general’ and ‘special’ revelation. The first, general revelation, is about discovering God in nature as I have discussed, whereas special revelation refers to specific moments or activities that reveal God in time; for example, in the Scriptures, in miracles, and in the person of Jesus Christ.

This distinction was picked up by the twentieth century theologian Karl Barth, however he rejected general revelation because he saw it as pagan and inadequate for the purpose of salvation. Barth promoted special revelation as being explicitly God’s revelation through the Word – or the Bible. He proposed that it is the Christian narrative which is God’s message to humanity and is therefore the effective means for people to encounter God.

This high view of the words of Scripture reflected Barth’s reformed theology, built on the foundations of the Swiss reformers Calvin and Zwingli. But there is more to it than a naïve Biblical literalism, (now popular in some protestant churches). His understanding was deeply theological, focussed on Christ’s saving work for all people on the cross, and worked out in the church’s missional activity.

For Barth, the way to encounter God was not through observation of the activities of the Creator in nature, or even contemplation of God’s transcendence, but rather by a theological encounter with God’s Word in Scripture, which subsequently leads to a commitment to act according to God’s will.

It is prefigured in that moment when the scribe Ezra brought out the Law of Moses and read it to the people (with interpretation), he created an encounter with God through understanding the Scriptures on the one hand, that resulted in a commitment from the people toward God’s law on the other. As the reading from Nehemiah states:

*So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation.
They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

(Nehemiah 8: 8)

God In Person

But there is more! One of the distinctive aspects of the Christian faith is that it is ‘personal’, by which I mean it is not just a set of ideas or practices but rather a personal encounter that leads to transformation and a growing commitment to God.

A perpetual heresy of the church through history is its propensity to turn the Christian faith into a set of specific beliefs and practices (or ideology) – in other words, a matter of ‘believing the right things and doing the right things’, without the element of the mystery of a personal encounter with God. This heresy is yet another expression of ‘salvation by works’ rather than by the grace of God; and it may be easily discerned about us today!

While the Scriptures provide a normative way of securing the Christian narrative through time, they nevertheless exist to reveal the nature of God by drawing our attention to Christ. The Bible is not meant to draw attention to itself – that would cause us to know about Jesus as an object but miss the personal and subjective encounter with Jesus as God’s presence in humanity.

Today’s Gospel reading describes Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue and read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

(Luke 4: 18-19)

He then came out with the extraordinary claim: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This was a personal encounter with the people of his childhood. It became confronting and did not end happily, with the people running him out of town!

It is one thing to know the scriptures and to know about Jesus, but it is another to be personally challenged by his message. Encounters with God in the flesh tended to confront people with a call to action. While Jesus had compassion for those in need, he had harsh words for the political and religious leaders, as well as for those who considered themselves justified because they ‘believed and did the right things’!

An encounter with Jesus was not so much an ideological or theological matter but instead an existential one where he called people to follow him on the way to the cross. At the same time, he brought good news, release, healing, freedom, and proclamation of God’s favour – which was something that the religious authorities seemed unable or unwilling to do in his own time.

We are also called to encounter Jesus the person, the one chosen and blessed by God to change the world. It is therefore vital for us to read and reflect on the gospel narratives to find that personal encounter with Jesus and thereby be challenged by his life and teaching. It is about following him on the way to God’s Kingdom, and why we emphasise the Gospel reading in our worship and preaching.

God In the Church

So far I have explored encountering God in nature, in the Bible, and in the person of Jesus as revealed in the Gospels. As the New Testament teaches, the personal encounter with Jesus did not end with his death, resurrection, and ascension.

The book of the *Acts of the Apostles* and the various epistles describe the ongoing work of Jesus through his followers – which is the church. The Pentecost Story of the coming of God’s Holy Spirit describes the fourth encounter we can have with God. Again, this is personal and experiential; it is not just an idea locked in the past.

The Spirit that was in Jesus is the same Spirit that is in us, God’s people today. We are called to continue the work of Christ. Indeed, the mystery is that we are Christ in the world today – even in our brokenness.

St Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

(1 Corinthians 12: 12-13)

The fourth encounter with God is through the followers of Jesus – well, at least it is meant to be. Unfortunately, too often we are not good witnesses to God’s loving presence.

We can be selfish, only responding when we get what we want – which is offering conditional grace. Or we can be narcissistic, finding fault in everyone else and refusing to be transformed into the likeness of Christ – which is arrogance and judgementalism. Or we can be fearful, seeking power and status for ourselves at the expense of others – such as seeking religious entitlement through legislation. Sadly, we will never change the world behaving like this, but nevertheless it is often the way we are. Indeed, we are a work in progress, constantly needing repentance and renewal.

The trees in the Blue Mountains that were ravaged by bushfires two years ago are now regenerate. They have rebirth out of calamity. God’s church likewise needs rebirth in our own time. We need to encounter God anew in nature, in the Scriptures, in the person of Jesus, and in each other. This is what we seek to do in our worship, in serving others, in teaching, in fellowship, and through proclamation of the Gospel. Let us return and encounter the living God!