

Dear Friends,

When the people of God had arrived in the promised land after their forty years' journey through the wilderness, Joshua, who had succeeded Moses as their leader, called them together in solemn assembly at Shechem (what became the capital of Samaria, the modern Nablus). There, as we hear in the first reading of this Sunday's Mass, he reminded them of all that God had done for them and put before them the challenge, Who are you going to follow? They answered enthusiastically, We will serve the Lord for he is our God. As time goes on they are not always that good in following him, but they have this basic orientation: they have made a fundamental option for God.

Our eucharistic assembly on Sunday is like this gathering of the people. We come together to recall God's great works, renew ourselves with his life and pledge to continue following him day by day, trusting in his guidance. The Mass, like the assembly at Shechem, is a sign and foretaste of the future gathering of all peoples in the kingdom of God, united in his love, all divisions overcome.

We look at the world as it is today and long for that future to be a reality here and now, not least when we consider what is happening in Afghanistan and the bleak future facing its people, especially its women and children, as they come again under the violent rule of religious fanatics. Like Palestine of old Afghanistan has been a buffer between more powerful neighbours. Other powers, Russia and the West, have sought to stabilise its regime, but always seem to fail - though one may wonder whether they need have abandoned the Afghan people to their fate as they seem to have done.

I have to say I really know very little about Islam, but I am sure that the Taliban are not representative of the true religion, which is one, like all the more mature world religions, that preaches peace and justice. We are waiting to see if the Taliban leopard really will change its spots, but they certainly have been a terrible example of what can happen when people think they have got God all worked out and properly understood, know that he is on their side and not that of others, and let their human greed and lust for power justify any amount of ill treatment of others who do not fit in with their ideas. And we have to admit that the Christian churches do not have a spotless record here either. Once you brand someone as a heretic, an unorthodox thinker, beyond the pale, it becomes easy to imagine you are right in doing anything to them to bring them back into the true fold.

A mystical Christian writer of the Middle Ages known as Meister Eckhart has a saying, *I pray God to rid me of God*. These mysterious words could have various meanings, but one meaning that Eckhart probably intends is that when we think of God, we are likely to be thinking of an *image* of God that we have, and that any image of God is going to be false, or at least is never going to be the whole truth about him. It may convey some truth, but God in himself, *as God*, must always go beyond any image of him that we can form. It is likely that our images will contain some reflection of ourselves, our own human ego, which makes them even more misleading. Many people, for example, like the Taliban, clearly have an image of a quite bloodthirsty punishing God - because that is what they themselves are like, and they then project that onto God. So Eckhart is praying that the true God may free him of the false images of what we call 'God.'

I had a good illustration of this once when I was doing an exercise with a group of church people. I gave them a list of words that we might use of God and asked them to tick the ones they were happy with, and then we would talk about their preferences. I included several of the standard terms by which we refer to God - Lord, Creator, Spirit, Shepherd, Redeemer - but also included two less usual ones - Schoolmaster and Lover. What was interesting was that nobody was happy using these two terms for God, but the way they talked about him showed that they did in fact think of God as a schoolmaster, of an old-fashioned disciplinarian kind, always ready to crack down on anyone stepping out line. They wanted God to be a God of that sort, a kind of celestial policeman, but it did not seem right to say so. Conversely, when you think of everything that is said in Scripture of the love of God, to call him a lover should not be so inappropriate, but again it somehow does not sound right. In both these cases what people were prepared to say about God reflected in a large measure their own human attitudes and preferences - which they then attributed to God. We all do this!

How can we be sure that our images do reflect the one true God? Can we say anything about him that is not just going to be misleading? For us as Christians, fortunately, the answer is that in our belief it is Jesus Christ who shows us the nature of God, not just in what he says, but above all in what he does. The care and concern for people, the desire to heal, feed, forgive and accept, that we see in Jesus is the truest image of God that we have. This, after all, is why we are Christians and not followers of another faith.

We can perhaps know a lot *about* God, know what are the correct Catholic beliefs to hold, but knowing about God is only a pale substitute for what really matters, and that is *knowing* God - knowing him as we might know a person. And we can know him in this way because we can know Jesus the Son of God, in what he does and says in the Scriptures, in other people, in the world around us, when we receive his own very life in the Mass as our holy communion.

In this Sunday's Gospel we have the final part of St. John's chapter 6, Jesus' teaching on the bread of life, which is inserted at this time of year into the gospel of St. Mark, which we are following in Year 2 of the Mass readings. Having heard everything that Jesus says about the bread of life, teaching which some could not accept, his disciples, like the people of God at Shechem, were faced with the question: who are you going to follow? Peter speaks for them, 'Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.' They decide to follow Christ because they *know* him, they know the holiness of God present in him. They will get things wrong and make mistakes, but at heart they know that this is the one they must follow and trust in God in him to show them what is right.

People sometimes say a useful rule of thumb about any action we might propose is: is this what Jesus would do? It is not a fool proof recipe, because we too make mistakes and interpret things wrongly, but it must be apparent that often some of the things that the self-appointed spokesmen for God do in his name are the last thing we could imagine Jesus doing. Everything we know about him in the Scriptures and in the Church shows us this. So

we try to live in faithfulness to him and hold before the world the image of Christ as the one who above all shows us who God is.

The other day there was a celebration of Pope St. Pius X, whose motto was

*instaurare omnia in Christo*

- to renew all things in Christ. Let us hope and pray that all things in this world will indeed be made new in Christ, and especially that those who suffer violence, hardship, neglect will be consoled by the love of God made visible in Jesus Christ.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

[\(robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk\)](mailto:robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk)