

## Why Worship an Almighty God?

*Genesis 2.4b-9,15-25*

*Revelation 4*

*Luke 8.22-25*

Monty Python's film the *Meaning of Life* is deeply irreverent. One scene is set in a school chapel where the chaplain leads schoolboys and teachers with the following words of worship:

*O Lord,... You are so big, so absolutely huge. Gosh, we're all really impressed down here I can tell You. Forgive us, O Lord, for this our dreadful toadying, and barefaced flattery. But you are so strong and, well, just so super. Fanastic. Amen.*

There is no doubt that this is a parody of worship. Yet like all good parody it speaks an element of truth. It is rightly critical of the misuse of power and bad religion. More uncomfortably, it challenges us to confront the question of whether our religious practice might be a parody. This is has divine sanction. Throughout his public life, even to the point of suffering and death, Jesus challenges the humourless and violent parody of bad religion. He confronts it in religious leaders, political powers, crowds, his disciples, and, more deeply, in the wilderness of the desert and the agony of Gethsemane and the Cross.

Monty Python's parody puts a direct question to us.

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This involves an age old dilemma. If God is almighty and loving then why is there so much suffering in our world? Is God powerless to respond? Is God nothing but an idol of our good intentions? Wouldn't it be more honest to admit no God exists?

Or, if God is all-powerful, yet does not respond consistently to the horrors in our world, then God cannot be loving. Instead God is like an arbitrary tyrant who acts in whatever way he wills. God's power mirrors human power taken to the extreme – God as warrior, absolute monarch, magician. But it is difficult to worship such a God with authenticity. This is worship based on distance, fear, servitude, the desire to curry divine favour or gain control.

Where does this leave us?

Our reading from the book of Revelation helps us. We are confronted with a rich and mysterious scene of worship in heaven where the whole creation sings.

*'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.... You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.'* (Revelation 4:8, 11).

God's almighty power is linked to the act of creation. This is not just about a single event in the past, like a religious parody of the big bang. God is the source of time and space, of everything's being in every moment. This is captured by the original Greek word for Almighty: pantocrator. This means the one who sustains all things in being, the one who holds everything in existence. This is the same word we use in the creed: we believe in God the Almighty, the pantocrator, who makes heaven and earth. And so too in today's Collect: *'Almighty God you have created the heavens and earth.'* Unlike the parody of the Almighty, the God who sustains us in being is not some remote despot or powerless deity of good intentions but intimate to us in the very core of our being. As St Augustine says, *'God is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves.'*

We see the intimacy of this act of creating in the Genesis narrative where human beings are described as God-formed and God-breathed. We are dust animated into a living whole made by God and for God. We are breathed into existence to share in the intimacy of God's life, an intimacy of being that we share with others who are bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh, and with the rest of creation.

This is where true worship wells up. For all things sing of God in their very being.

As the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, puts it so well: *'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.... There lives the dearest freshness deep down things'*.

The psalms often tell of how creation sings of this intimate presence of God. Creation is, if you like, the first and most fundamental sacrament. For in their beauty and mystery, the things of nature shimmer with a presence not of our own making. God creates all things, sustains all things – for the sheer joy of it. God's divine joy is all-powerful because it sings creatures into being. Their song, their cooing, mooing, barking, neighing, twittering, buzzing, warbling, roaring combines into one great dawn chorus. There is laughter woven into the fabric of things which outstrips the laughter of parody. This is a joy to which we humans are awaited. Worship is our joining in the feast of creation's celebration of being.

If this all seems far away from the realities of our life and church, from our own secret thoughts and often destructive actions then our sorrow and anger at its absence can become part of the song. The One who sustains all things will hear our prayers and send down mercy like drops of rain that soften our hearts where for tears of sorrow and repentance he gives tears of joy and blessing.

As the rich symbolism of the book of Revelation shows us, the closer we come to the mysterious presence of God in worship, the more we encounter God all around us in the mysterious beauty of others. Our

worship becomes heavenly, sustaining and creative when it opens up our hearts and the heart of world to God.

In this way our worship becomes the living energy that transforms our vision, actions and world. Worship escapes into poetry and art, justice and acts of kindness, friendship and family life, a politics of the common good, a defence of the ecosystem. Such worship shakes the dust of violence off human society to reanimate it with God's breath. Indeed, without this our worship remains a parody, disconnected from life.

We can now understand the significance of our Gospel. It would be easy to see this as Jesus Almighty performing miracles. Yet, in the midst of a sudden storm, Jesus calls his disciples to a deeper faith in the sustaining presence of God in all things. For the wind and the waves too praise God. Jesus challenges his disciples to let go of the parody of an Almighty God when they cry out '*Master, Master we are perishing!*' (Luke 8:24). They are not to deny fear but go beyond it into amazement. They are, like the sleeping Jesus, to rest in the presence of the One who embraces all things; a presence that shines out in the person of Jesus.

This is content of our Eucharistic worship. Instead of a journey into fear and servitude, into parody and violence, the Eucharist, invites us more deeply into God's almighty power. At the beginning of our service, we prayed to God Almighty to open our hearts to the Spirit.

We then prayed to God Almighty when we asked for and received forgiveness. We will soon join with the angels to sing of God's might in the Eucharistic prayer where bread and wine are transformed into the sustaining presence of God and we are remade into the sustaining body of Christ. At the end of our service we receive the blessing of God Almighty as we are sent out in peace to be God's sustaining song of being. In our Eucharist, we discover over and over that God's almighty power is expressed through hearts' opened to the joy of being, forgiveness, transformation, communion and the blessing of peace.