

Playing with God

David Wilbourne's sermon for 2nd Sunday before Lent

The Jewish and Christian faith

can only work

if you're a code-breaker

su doku solver

and crossword buff

all rolled into one.

Which may come as a bit of shock to you.

Surely faith is about being fed,

trusting

accepting?

Surely faith isn't about

analysing,

quizzing,

puzzling?

Surely the very lay-out of this church,

pews all facing to the front,

suggests biddable animals ranged in their stalls

waiting for feeding time?

'Trust and obey

for there's no other way

to be happy in Jesus

than to trust and obey.'

How wrong can you be.

The first and second languages of the Christian faith,

Hebrew and Greek,

signal that faith is a marriage

an interaction

an engaging between God and human beings

sine qua non

faith is dead in the baptismal waters.

Until the 7th Century AD

written down Hebrew

the language of the Old Testament

consisted only of consonants;

the reader had to supply the vowels.

To give an example:

the text would only supply the letters PT;

your brain would have to look at the context

and decide whether the word was

pat, pet, pit, pot or put.

I gave the dog a PT
is most likely to be pat
but could be pet, pit, pot or put.
if the sentence was taking an unconventional turn.
I've simplified the issue,
because in English we only have five vowels,
six if you count y,
seven if you stray to Wales and count w!

Whereas Hebrew had at least 15.
So a simple word with one vowel
could have 15 possible expressions,
a word with two vowels
15 squared, 225 possible expressions,
a word with three vowels
15 cubed, 3375 expressions.
My Christian name and surname,
which contains six vowels
could therefore have 15 to the power six,
i.e. 11 million
three hundred and ninety thousand
six hundred and twenty five expressions.

Which means you'd have more chance
of winning the lottery
than pronouncing my name right
with just the consonants of the Hebrew text.

The way they got around it
was to intone the correct text
from generation to generation,
father would sing it to son,
mother to daughter.
Even though a tune could take a million turnings,
that doesn't deter us,
we know,
we remember the correct tune,
and sing it with confidence.
So in a sense the Jews sang their Scriptures
with confidence,
generation teaching successive generation
how to lift them from the written text.
But who sang them the tune to start with
is the million dollar question.

Three centuries before Christ
the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek,
which very sensibly had seven vowels,
eight if you count *r*
as letters.

And Greek was the language
in which the New Testament was written.
Not such a puzzler.

Except that paper was in such short supply
and so expensive
that you weren't allowed the luxury
of spaces between words
so in a sentence words would run into each other
like a pile up of cars on the M1.

So the confession of the most ardent believer,
God is now here
and that of the most ardent atheist
God is nowhere
would look exactly the same in the text
and the reader would have to unscramble it.

I'm sorry to tell you this,
but I have simplified the issue.
Reality was far more complex.
But I hope my oversimplification
indicates how reading the scriptures
let alone translating them
required a stroke of genius,
God-given genius.
Faith doesn't require suspension of our minds,
our wisdom,
but their total and utter engagement.

Our reading from Proverbs
imagined wisdom as a person
beside God at creation
and delighting in all his works then
and ever since.
We immediately run up against a puzzle
in the way wisdom is described.
We are just given two letters
m and *n*.

Is the word *ummanu*

master craftsmen

or *amun*

toddler?

Master craftsmen

carries the idea of wisdom

as a partner with God from the very beginning,

God and wisdom

God and Slartibartfast

of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* fame

world builders unlimited.

'How much ice do you think we need for the poles, Slarti?'

'Phew, a fair few tons I reckon, governor.'

But positing two separate divine beings

at creation and beyond

hardly squares with a faith

which was fiercely monotheistic:

'Thou shalt have none other gods but me,'

Jehovah had roared from Mount Sinai,

fiercely prohibiting polytheism

I don't think *MN*

is *ummanu*,

master craftsman.

It simply doesn't square with Israel's

faith experience of God's oneness.

Even though, interestingly,

most English translations go for master craftsmen.

I prefer *MN* to be *amun*,

toddler,

literally a little girl,

a little darling,

wisdom playing at God her father's feet

whilst daddy got on with the serious business

of creating,

saying

'Coo, look at those alps,

just look at those oceans'

now and again.

Having wisdom as a darling daughter strains monotheism

but I don't think blows it apart.

The daughter as the offspring of the parent

doesn't diminish the sovereignty of God,

no more than mankind as God's offspring does.

And the idea of God
being both work and play
is refreshing.
God and mastercraftsman
smack too much
of the workaholic
the ever-busy,
the never-stop attitude which infects our present-day
society.

The God who interacts with his creation
through the playful eyes of a child,
who is amused when she is amused
strikes me as liberating.

When my toddler children awoke me
in the middle of the night
and showed me the moon
and the midnight cat sitting on our wall
I found it liberating.

Moving away from
faith being deadly serious
and sometimes

daring to see creation as God wakened and at play
seems a key to faith.

If God is not a god of play,
if God is not a god of fun,
how else can we explain the dinosaurs,
or quite a few folk when it comes to that?

And then comes our Gospel reading,
wisdom is no longer a toddler daughter,
but has changed sex to *Logos*
the word
a wise son.

If only Jesus had been a girl
it would have been so much simpler!

But the *Logos* has the same qualities
as the darling little girl who plays at God's feet.
The *Logos*,
there at the beginning at the first act of creation
The *Logos* bringing light and life and flourishing.
The *Logos* calling and calling,
brooking no rejection,

waiting on joyful response
and people firing into life
as true children of God.

Wisdom, *Logos*

personified in Jesus.

Almost as if God the Father

provides us with the harsh consonants,

God the Wisdom,

God the Word,

God the darling toddler,

God the cheering son

provides us with the vowels

to give celestial music

to our otherwise deadly language.

And the Spirit,

given voice through us,

gives God the lyrics

without which even celestial music

would be so eternally boring.