
What's Wrong with God?

Acts 2.1-21, John 15.26-7, 16.4b-15

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 31, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

A month after my ordination I was called to an overcrowded house in the poorest part of town. All I knew was that a 53-year-old man was dead. I knocked at the door, and a young man in his early twenties answered. He saw my clerical collar and realized straightaway I'd come to talk about his father's funeral. Without pausing for breath he said, "Most people when they have a heart attack get a second chance but my dad just dropped dead out of the blue so there isn't a God then is there?" Sensing this wasn't the moment to run through the top ten arguments for God's existence, I tried to hold his gaze. I simply said, "I'm sorry." The young man stared back at me for what seemed like minutes and finally looked down at the doormat and said, in resignation, "Why don't you come inside?"

When it comes to reasons for not believing in God you'd think that stories like this would be well up there. Somehow in allowing this kind of suffering in the world it seems God has lost the moral argument. Meanwhile the discoveries of modern science are sometimes construed as suggesting God has lost the intellectual argument. It's easy to get a hold of some wonderful discoveries about life, the world and the universe and project from there that everything in existence can be reduced to a bunch of mathematical formulae. And then there are other faiths. For some people the fact that so many people believe so differently is evidence that we all somehow made the whole God thing up. God's lost the moral and intellectual argument, and now seems to have lost the practical one too.

But these big three questions – suffering, science and other faiths – seldom turn out to be the great obstacles to faith they're cracked up to be. The young man I talked to on the doorstep wasn't saying "I've lost my faith," he was saying "I'm in tremendous pain and grief." You can't be angry at something that doesn't exist. The discoveries of science deepen our sense of wonder at God's creation. They don't require us to assume nature's a mindless machine. The existence of other faiths tells us that most of humanity in most places for most of human existence has had some kind of faith in God. Those all sound more like arguments *for* God than against God to me. Suffering, science and other faiths don't really have to be such big obstacles to faith.

I'll tell you what I think the *real* obstacle to faith is. It's more in the heart than the head. Jesus seems so far away. That's it. That's the problem. Jesus just seems so far away. In fact it's three problems.

Problem one is that Jesus seems far off because 2000 years seems so long ago. We know in our heads that in the whole history of the world 2000 years ago isn't yesterday it's a second or two ago. We've all seen those charts that map the history of the world onto a 24-hour clock. Most of the 24-hour day is filled with rocks and no animate life, then the amoeba has the planet to itself for a while, before the much-maligned dinosaurs fill up a lot of the rest, and humanity emerges in the last two seconds and Jesus is born about a milisecond ago. That should make us think Jesus is very close but it doesn't. We live lives shaped by air conditioning and retirement packages and bank accounts and news media – and first-century Palestine is like a fairy land of donkeys and demons and sandals and swords and a desperate lack of dentists and deodorant. It doesn't matter how many life-application bibles we read, Jesus just comes out of another world. That's problem one: Jesus seems so long ago.

And here's problem two. Jesus seems far removed because he really is literally so *far away*. One of the reasons so many Christians feel so drawn to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land is because Jesus seems so close there. Jerusalem feels distressingly full of guns and politics and postcards, but the Sea of Galilee really feels like the Sermon on the Mount could be preached there this very day. Visiting Galilee is like a grieving parent returning to the site of a family beach holiday – every wave on the shore is an echo of Jesus and every shimmer on the ocean could be Jesus walking on the water. But Jesus being far away isn't just about geography. It's also about cosmology. Jesus is in heaven. However much we know the distance to heaven isn't measurable like working out how far it is from here to San Diego, we can't help feeling heaven's a whole lot more than a four-day road

trip. And so we feel like the grieving parent. We can hang round the places Jesus was with us, but they only make the ache of his absence more acute. That's problem two: Jesus just seems so *far away*.

And here's problem three. Jesus seems far away because he's so *different* from us. In a multicultural university like Duke we constantly talk about difference, and usually we mean race or gender, sometimes class or religion or sexual orientation, or occasionally basketball affiliation. There's no doubt Jesus was different from most of us in race, from many of us in class and gender, and from almost all of us in religion – he *was* a Jew, after all. But the biggest difference is the one we don't mention in multicultural world so much. He was just so darn *good*. In my pastoral experience the biggest reason people stay away from organized religion is that they know they're mean, greedy, lustful, and selfish, and they somehow get the idea that that means God's not for them. When we know we've let ourselves and others and God down, our first instinct is to run and hide – hide from one another and hide from God. Jesus may have done amazing things for us, but sometimes those amazing things just make us feel all the more how wretched we ourselves really are. That's problem three: Jesus seems so *different* from us.

Well, that's the bad news. But today is the day of Pentecost. Today's the day we take our eyes off Jesus for just one second and say "We believe in the Holy Spirit." And that's very good news. Because the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is all about what Christians have discovered is God's answer to the problem that Jesus seems so far away. God doesn't deny that Jesus is far away. The good news isn't that we're mistaken about Jesus being long ago, far distant, and very different from us. The good news is that God has sent us the Holy Spirit. And what that means is three words that address the three problems we've just identified. These are the three words.

Word number one is: Now. Jesus feels long ago. But it's the Holy Spirit that makes Jesus present *now*. It's the Holy Spirit that gives us words when we don't know how to pray. It's the Holy Spirit that sends us angels in ordinary human form when we don't know where to turn for help. It's the Holy Spirit that makes Jesus present in the bread and wine of holy communion. It's the Holy Spirit that comes down in baptism and makes the believer a child of God and a part of the body of Christ. It's the Holy Spirit that comes into our ears and eyes and hearts when we read the Bible and turns the dry words on the page into the living word that renews and revives and transforms. The Holy Spirit brings the heritage of what God has done in the past, and the destiny of what God promises to do in the future, and makes them both very, very present. That's word number one. The Holy Spirit makes Jesus present *now*.

And word number two is: Here. Jesus feels far away. But it's the Holy Spirit that makes Jesus present *here*. If we're honest we need to recognize that for some people all the time and for all of us some of the time the farawayness of Jesus is actually a good thing. When Jesus is far away he can remain an intellectual pursuit and a theoretical option. It's only when Jesus is here, right here, that we have to face whether we're going to follow him or not and we search around desperately for a fence to sit on but we suddenly find every shop in town is clean out of fences. It's only when Jesus is right here that he's scary, because he wants our heart, and while he's about it he doesn't just want our heart he wants our soul and mind and strength too. Some people go on about the heart a lot and some people find that alienating because they're not the emotional type, and if that's you my suggestion is stick with the soul and mind and strength for now because that's plenty to be getting along with. The Holy Spirit takes Jesus from distant Palestine and far away heaven and puts him right here. That's word number two. The Holy Spirit makes Jesus present *here*.

And word number three is: Us. Jesus feels very different to us. But it's the Holy Spirit that makes us like Jesus. It's the Holy Spirit that gives us gifts we never before had that make us rise to the occasion when God asks us to do something we thought we could never dream of. It's the Holy Spirit that nurtures us like houseplants and sees fruit bear in us, sees us become patient where we'd only known exasperation, sees us find peace where we'd only experienced anxiety, sees us develop gentleness where we'd only known haste and clumsiness. It's the Holy Spirit that gives us power to stand up and not be crushed, to face failure and not despair, to make friendships in spite of our fears. The technical word for all of this is sanctification. And the key to it is to see that word number three isn't the singular "me" it's the plural "us." The gifts and fruits and power of the Holy Spirit aren't given to us privately – they're shared amongst the whole church. No one has all of them. If we're short of some of them we probably haven't been hanging around each other enough. The Holy Spirit doesn't

make us individually like Christ. The Holy Spirit makes us *together* like Christ. If we want to be like Christ we have to hang round the church, hang round one another. That's word number three. The Holy Spirit makes Jesus present in *us*.

One of the wisest people I've ever met was a palliative care physician in Scotland. This is what he once said to me. "I went to visit a cancer patient in her home. She looked thin and fragile. I've never been much good at small talk, so I pointed to a photograph on the mantelpiece and tried to be cheerful. 'You've certainly got a beautiful daughter,' I said. There was a long silence. The woman gave me a look that sliced straight through me. 'That was me, six months ago,' she said. I was speechless. I just found strength to say, 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.'"

For me that physician shows us a lot about the Holy Spirit. When he made his colossal pastoral gaffe he could've curled up in excruciated embarrassment and run straight out the door. It was the Holy Spirit that kept him in the room. The Holy Spirit somehow gave him the grace to be *now* – to forget about his mistake and instead to focus everything in him and beyond him on a woman who needed every ounce of strength and insight and expertise he could give. The Holy Spirit somehow gave him the power to be *here* – to leave aside the concerns of his life and be entirely present and aware of what God was doing in that room. The Holy Spirit somehow gave him the compassion to be *us*, to communicate gently and sincerely to that fragile woman that they were in this together, that he was deeply in touch with her pain. And somehow all three of those priceless qualities were perfectly expressed in the way he said those simplest of words, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I can't tell you how hard I've tried as a pastor to be able say those words as he said them, how much I've wanted to be filled with the Holy Spirit as he was filled, how much I've yearned to help the congregations and people I've served to know the power of the Holy Spirit in those three words, "here," "now," "us." If we want to be bearers of God's Holy Spirit, and we want to make Jesus present to people like that fragile woman with cancer and that young man who'd just lost his father, we need to let ourselves be shaped by the astonishing liberating and exhilarating news of these three simple words. Here. Now. Us.

The day of Pentecost begins with everything that seems to be wrong with God. It's only ten days since the Ascension but Jesus is already too long ago, too far away, too different from the very human disciples. But the day of Pentecost ends with the three amazing things we discover when we truly encounter the work of the Holy Spirit. God is present right now. God is at work even here. God is truly alive in us.