

Reflection for Sunday 30 May (Trinity)

The concert pianist Stephen Hough tells how, on the way to the Royal Festival Hall to practice for a concert, he saw a poster on the side of a bus: 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and get on with your life'. Two minutes later he saw another. 'I felt exhilarated,' he said. 'My mind had been preoccupied precisely with my life, how to 'get on with it,' how to play the recital the following afternoon without worrying about my nerves, the voicing of the piano – whether my suit was pressed – all the material things that swim around us and in which we swim. And then, on the side of a bus, I was reminded of God. I stopped worrying and enjoyed ... well, at least the rest of the afternoon.'

I suspect that even amongst the 19% of our fellow Britons who say they are certain of God's existence, the image they hold of God would not be quite so comforting. It probably ties in rather more strongly with the conviction of a rather larger group of folk, who claim a vague belief in a higher power, by which they mean someone (or something) who pulls the strings. Whether or not he (it usually is a he) actually sits on a cloud is really neither here nor there.

Research published a few years ago points out that even those who don't believe in God, do believe in fate, that somehow, whether it was written in stars or in the tea leaves, it was 'meant to be.' Why? Probably because such an idea introduced a sense of order into a world that otherwise seems pretty chaotic and somehow lets us off the hook – there are some things we can't control.

That said, I'm entirely with Stephen Hough when he also says that a world populated only by 'Christians' would be a pretty scary prospect. He goes as far as to claim that it would probably turn him into becoming the first atheist.

Our problem is that all of us, Christians, as well as those who find the idea of faith a mystifying nonsense, have difficulty coming to terms with who or what God really is. We try to create a God who either reflects us, even with our hang-ups, or who fills in the gaps of our ignorance.

In a way the Old Testament got it right when it piled up images of God or adjectives to describe God, that when put together seem to make no sense at all because they seem to be random and even contradictory.

Here are just a few: rock, shepherd, avenger, mighty, jealous, a mother (also mother hen, bear or eagle), fuller's soap, provider, refining fire, fortress, creator, light. The list is truly huge. See how many more you can add – it'll send you back to sleep quickly if you're restless in the small hours of the morning. And the point? God is impossible to describe adequately in words – or pictures, which is why some of the most famous Old Testament images of God are impossible to realise in pen or paint.

The New Testament images of God are more consistent, perhaps, with life, light and love to the fore, but none of those add up to a big fellow up there who controls our fate at whim.

What we also have, of course, is the story of Jesus Christ. He too it seems, at least according to St John, was not averse to using a plethora of images about himself to help us understand him better. Some of these clearly overlap with the images of God we've already encountered in the Old Testament: I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the door, the good shepherd, the resurrection and life, the way the truth and the life, but yet again, none of them tell the whole story.

And that's the point – the story. The story is the point. It's like a great piece of music, a painting, a wonderful novel or poem. It's engrossing, entrancing, unsettling, comforting, beguiling, perplexing and fascinating.

And one of the main reasons for this is that it's a story that whilst it may be odd in many ways, it seems to relate very directly to our most profound human needs and experiences. It helps us to put things into perspective. It helps us to see, hear and feel differently. It's as if God – or what really matters – is to be found right in the detail of our lives as much as in the great, grand and inexplicable events over which we have no control.

We could if we wish, and the Bible itself never bothers to do this explicitly, so I really wouldn't lose a great deal of sleep over it, suggest that God is known in different ways – in that transcendent life force that brought the world into being, in the life-giving, life enhancing story of Jesus and in the messy intimacy of ordinary things – one in three and three in one. A trinity. Just words. But what lies behind them surely matters so much more, especially those things we find to be true.

For Stephen Hough, there is the possibility that God offers 'someone to thank for those moments of ecstasy we experience in life, those gifts that' [seem to] 'have no human source.' Everything in life, he says, is a gift.

If you're able to look at life like that, then you're probably holier than me.

I find Hough's love of a little hymn from the ninth century easier to relate to. It says so much more than our piling up of words in an ever more desperate attempt to get God right, and which yet it reminds us that God is no cold, fateful master, who cares little for our ordinariness. It goes like this: *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est* ('where there is charity and love, there is God'). 'I think that's an existence (of God, and for me) that's worth living,' says Hough. I couldn't agree more.