

"Jesus is the image of the unseen God" (Col 1;15)

This is a key piece of the Bible for me. It helps me, as a Christian, understand God. This is what makes us different from Jews and Muslims. Otherwise we are all one family of faith, sharing the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) and each adding some other pieces of our own.

The big, huge difference is this. We believe that you get to see the heart of the Father revealed in the actions, teachings and life of Jesus. You could say that Jesus is like a sky-light in one of those dark domed European cathedrals, full of paintings of heaven and hell. When you look up at the ceiling you see our best guesses at heaven, but when you look through the sky-light of Jesus, you get to see heaven itself.

And what *do* you see when you look through Jesus?

Jesus in prayer to the God who is so much a father that Jesus calls him Daddy (in Hebrew "Abba"). Jesus born in poverty, the child of homeless refugees. A helpless baby. That is a view of God.

Jesus, a child, who leads his mother into joy and tragedy; a sword to pierce her soul.

Jesus understanding things as a teenager that are too simple and deep for the scholars to grasp. Jesus who pauses and turns around for one poor soul after another. Who risks his reputation to be kind to another outsider. Who forgives, and tells of forgiveness given by God even before it is asked. Who is prepared to face hostility and anger rather than step in line with the twisted half-truths of a tired religion. Jesus who will not give up, will not stop hoping, believing, trusting, forgiving, paying attention and never striking back.

I could go on...

What you see here is a series of snapshots of the heart and character of Jesus's father; the One I call God.

It is this window onto the Divine which we have in Jesus that separates us Christians from other faiths, with whom we often share almost everything else.

I must say that I find Advent largely very irritating because you would often hardly notice that we were Christians, as I understand that distinction. How quickly we fall back into the comfort of "the good guys and the bad guys" way of thinking!

Listening to the readings around Advent, from the less helpful bits of the Hebrew scriptures and from some of the wavering fear-based thoughts of the early church facing terrible persecutions, you sense we are lapsing back into a pre-Christian understanding of the Fear of the Lord.

"In will sweep the Lord of thunder and armies with the doom of the world", by which we mean hell for people who we don't like, and the reward of the people we do like.

But wait! Does this sound like Jesus? Or does it sound like Odin, the Norse warrior God from Valhalla, sweeping down, as the Vikings did, with fire and violence upon the villages of their enemies?

When we look through the sky-light of Jesus do we see Genghis Khan? No, we do not!

Those Christians who await a doom-filled, condemning judgment, followed by pain and howling and eternal punishment for those who didn't belong to the church.... Well, somewhere along the line they stopped looking out of the Jesus window and started looking somewhere else.

That, or God had a sudden personality change. Or maybe Jesus was wrong, and so am I.

Today's readings are a bit better. And here I feel the Anglican lectionary (The Cycle of readings spread over three years which takes us through the most important bits of the Bible), has

managed to break out of doom and gloom and re-take the optimism of the Way of Christ. There is an assertion that, in spite of the evidence, we will doggedly continue to believe that God can bring something better to us.

Isaiah believes that we will all find our way home. God will see to it that even fools get home to him. God will see to it that even the most awful thing, (like being attacked by lions if you live where lions live, or like being frozen painfully to death when your car breaks down in winter, if you live in Ontario) God will see to it that nothing can separate you from his love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Even James, who was a bit of an old misery, and had a hard uphill go of life by the sound of it, manages a bit of hopeful optimism. He knows he cannot be Christ-like on his own. And so he expresses his belief in the love of God by talking of "help is on its way". It is this belief that has enabled not a few of us to get through and not sink into despair.

But it is the Gospel which ends with this;

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

In my metaphor Jesus says, "In the gloom beneath the cathedral dome John holds up a light brighter than any other before him, but those who step into the ray of true sunlight that will fall through the skylight I open, they shall radiate light as John never could."

In Jesus the light, the true light which can enlighten anyone, has come into the world.

God's light shines out of the Word made flesh, and as we return and return to the Gospel Word we behold his glory, the glory as of the only window onto the Father, revealing all the light of grace and truth.

Advent does not call me to a fearful worry about the end of the world. Advent cheerfully urges me to step back into the pool of light which is the love of the Father pouring onto me when I stand as close to where I think Jesus would be standing in my life as I can manage.

Don't be misled into thinking the Kingdom of God arrives after you die. The Kingdom of God is wherever Christ would be in your life.

Just like there is a difference between a ray of sunlight and the sun, our experience of the Kingdom is only a fraction of the fullness of God's presence. But the sunlight is actually the sun here in our midst. If you stand in it, you will be made ready for its fullness.

If you keep in the shadows, or you follow the fearful dark God of vengeance and doom, then you will never be able to stand the light of love of the Father, and being in his presence may be, for you, a searing hell of unbearable brightness.

I like the new blue colour of Advent! I like that we are singing joyful carols, not the traditional mournful Advent dirges! I am delighted we have a tree lit up in our front window! I am chuffed that we are excitedly getting ready for a birthday! I am so glad this Church is full of light, not gloom!

Let your light so shine before your world that everyone can see the goodness God is pouring out in you and be drawn to find out where it comes from.

A happy Advent to you!