



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Nativity of Our Lord, Thursday, December 24th 2015

I've often wondered why God never seems to act like God. After all, he's got all the power in the universe at his disposal, but he very rarely seems to use it to any great extent. With all that power at his fingertips, all we get is a demonstration of amazing restraint.

Indeed, God acts in ways that are so unlike God that a lot of people have trouble believing he exists. Aristotle, one of the brightest guys who ever lived, spent a lot of time pondering the question.

He concluded the universe is so meticulously ordered, it is obviously created. But, he went on, the "intelligence" (God) that created it is, of necessity, so different from us that he (she or it) would be utterly unknowable to human beings unless he chose to reveal himself to us.

Curiously, most religions, other than our own, have gods that conform readily with the human concept of the divine. They are swift to flex supernatural muscles. The Greek and Roman gods really knew how to deal with folks who got on their nerves – turning them into frogs or into stags to be ripped to bits by hounds.

And if gods of other faiths don't do the dirty deeds themselves, they apparently have no inhibitions about getting their worshippers to do the job for them. Look at the Middle East: Whole civilizations are being wiped out by folks who imagine they are acting at the behest of their particular brand of deity to implement his plan for mankind, or whatever's left of it when they finish.

If you subscribe to Aristotle's hypothesis, none of these gods can qualify as the great Creator of the Universe because they are all, behaviorally speaking, far too easily recognizable. They are capricious, cruel, lustful, rapacious and

bloodthirsty. Far from being creators of the universe, they are creations of the human mind.

So how does our God stack up by Aristotle's standards?

Well, he certainly doesn't behave the way human beings do when we say they are behaving like God. He doesn't boss us about and demand extravagant sacrifices to demonstrate our regard for him – the lives of our First Born, for instance. Indeed, he seems to care very much more about us than he cares about himself.

Only four of his 10 most important commandments deal with the way we should treat him. All of the others are concerned with the way we should behave towards one another. What's more, the purpose of the 613 laws in the Torah – the first five books of the Old Testament – is to enable us to live in harmony with our fellow men.

In fact, when a pushy young lawyer asked which of the 613 laws was the most important, Jesus went back to the earliest days of God's revelation of himself to the Jewish people, and quoted from two books of the Torah: Deuteronomy and Numbers.

"Hear O Israel . . ." he said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul and with all thy strength. This is the first Commandment. And the second means exactly the same thing: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as much as you love yourself. There is no other law greater than these. These two laws encapsulate the Torah and writings of the Prophets." In other words, God wants us to love him by loving our fellow men. How amazingly generous!

In the Old Testament, we read plenty about the plans God has for humanity, but he doesn't tell us

much about himself. He tells us he is a spirit and therefore, unlike us, he has no sex. But he goes on to say that if we want to picture him in our minds, we would do better to picture him as a father than a mother.

(An explanation for that, I guess, is that, even in this enlightened age mothers, are apt to tell misbehaving offspring: “Wait till your father hears about this.”)

More difficult, he says he is not a single person, but three distinct individuals, sharing one divine nature. Sounds like a character in Doctor Who, doesn't it?

But one thing is clear: this business of the Holy Trinity certainly complies with Aristotle's theory that it is impossible know God unless he reveals himself to us. For how is it possible for folks such as us – who share our solitary, single nature with nobody but ourselves – even conceive of a thing as unworldly as a Trinitarian being?

More outrageous, God says he is not only Trinitarian, he also says he is love. Not that simply he loves, but that he actually IS LOVE. This might seem a odd: Yet it is entirely logical he would truly BE LOVE. How else could three divine persons share one divine nature in perfect harmony if they were not, themselves, perfect love?

The fact that God is Love, in turn, supplies the likely motive for creating us. Odd though it might seem, he made us so he could love us and so we can love him. And it also explains why he gave us free will: for without free will there cannot be genuine love. If love is to be genuine there must always be the option of rejecting it.

This also explains why God doesn't constantly intervene in our affairs when things go badly wrong. Were he to dash in and save us whenever

As St John put it: “So God loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” This is the real gift of Christmas – a gift that far exceeds the most extravagant present beneath your Christmas tree. Aristotle As St John put it this way: “So God loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” This is the real gift of Christmas – a gift that far exceeds the most extravagant As

we got in trouble (through the wiles of the devil or the consequences of our sins) we'd have no option but to obey his every command. But that would not be love – for as every teenager knows, love is an emotion that cannot be compelled.

Yet God's perfect love presents us with a problem far beyond our human capacity resolve: Perfection cannot, by virtue of it nature, co-exist with imperfection. We are very far from perfect. None of us live perfect lives no matter how hard we might try.

Even the most saintly among sin on a daily basis: St Jerome, the translator of the Bible, also wrote rude and uncharitable letters. St Nick, who in many respects exemplifies the spirit of Christmas, was in the habit of punching out folks who disagreed with him. And, as St Paul so bluntly puts it: “The wages of sin is death.”

But how can God reconcile his love for us with the fact this gift of free will – the very gift that enables us to love him – also condemns us to death? The answer to this conundrum brings us face to face with the baby in the manger at Bethlehem.

In another affirmation of Aristotle's hypothesis, God has done something he has never asked of human being to do: He sent his only begotten son – perfect man and perfect God – to pay the price for the sins we commit.

Nothing could be more modest and self effacing – less Godlike by humanity's way of thinking – than way the great creator of the universe came to redeem us, the creatures he, himself, created. God became incarnate as that most vulnerable of beings – a tiny human baby. He put himself at the mercy of his own creation – human beings whose boundless capacity for tenderness and affection is matched only by their capacity for cruelty, envy, suspicion and greed.

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