

What Should we Expect from God

It's a question that often emerges in the searching that goes on for many people. "If God is real, how will he contact me? If God is going to touch me, how will I know that it is happening?"

In response to such a question, I would say that first and foremost, all people experience what I would call God moments, but those moments are not always recognised for what they are. Sure they maybe moments of some form of enlightenment, but to be able to acknowledge an experience as being from God, one needs to have a learned language set. They will have also been gifted a vision in which their eyes have been opened in a new way. Pause for a moment and consider the occasions on which Jesus healed someone, and then told them not to tell anybody what he had done for them. With countless local healers and magicians in the environment, Jesus was absolutely clear that being seen as another itinerant healer, was not what his divine mission was all about.

Almost always, those who become apostles, or a part of the inner circle are people who have caught a deeper insight. Take Peter for example. When he first meets Jesus, he certainly senses something profound, but unknown to him. The best that Peter can come up with, is to ask Jesus where he lives. Peter knows that there is something about Jesus that he does not yet understand, and that preliminary knowing is something that Peter does not want to lose.

The first thing I would want to say, is that there are no black and white rules to explain or define the presence of God.. For each person the touch of God is as diverse as Paul's description of gifts bestowed on people.¹ Having been gifted with a vision of the presence of Jesus, Paul can also talk about the many different roles that people might be called to as they come to faith.²

In a similar kind of way, if God is going to visit us in a very personal way, then be assured that such an encounter will be appropriate, but just what shape that appearance takes is not fore-knowable. Additionally, as I have already said, we may not recognise that encounter for what it is.

One of the reasons this can be so unpredictable, is that we tend to default to thinking in concrete terms. In varying ways, and to varying degrees, we have, what one might describe as black and white vision. The problem with that, is that if we are quoting biblical text, we don't seem to recognise that right from the beginning of *Genesis*, all the way to the *Revelation*, the writers are using a rich form of imagery and lots of metaphor. How many people, for instance, realise that there are two creation stories in *Genesis*. *Genesis* 1:1- 2:1-3 is the first story, and *Genesis* 2:4-25 is the second. There are at least three significant points to embrace in these stories, and they are not always seen if one focuses on the details of the creation event.

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

² 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

The big story, is that all that we have and are, was made by God.

In the first Creation story, mankind is the final act. Mankind is the peak of the story.

In the second story Mankind is the first created living being. From there, all the beasts of the world are brought before Man and God asks him to name them all. Here mankind is given responsibility for the care of the environment.

If you read the text literally, then you get stuck with an unsolvable conflict. Read the text as dramatic imagery however, and suddenly the whole universe opens up before you. You discover that when the early Hebrew tribes wanted to talk about how things came to be, their first port of call, was a religious narrative. They already understood that God made everything. They also understood that mankind had a role to play in the continuing creation. Thus, the significant roles in which mankind is portrayed in each story.

Now instead of getting bogged down in extreme detail, let me walk you through an event that actually happened just a few short weeks ago.

It is a family's worst nightmare. Birth is immanent. The mother is being carefully watched. The birth is expected within days,.....The Midwife raises a concern and the mother is admitted to hospital for urgent attention. Too late. Tragedy has struck. The baby has been lost.

The pall of gloom lowers itself on not just the mother and father together with the hospital team, but also on the extended family. Grand parents, uncles and aunties, cousins and siblings.

Whilst this was not my family, I was close enough into it, to able to call them to a time of pastoral reflection and prayer. And so we gathered for prayer. Grief poured out. Prayers were offered. Scripture was read.

And then, as I reflected on the situation for the family, there came a leap off point. Among the scriptures read was John 14:1-3. In my Father's house are many rooms. (Mansions)

As is so often the case when I begin to reflect on scripture, I found myself almost over-whelmed by powerful imagery. The first image came from the experience of being in this grieving group. As we started to listen to scripture and prayed for the family, I realised that a profound change had taken place. What had been a disparate collection of family members, had now become a unified and gathered family, all reading from the same page. And further, they now embraced a palpable atmosphere that one could only describe as love. In that atmosphere, they were poised to act. They would not just sit and pray. They wanted to do something relevant. They wanted to express their love and care for their grieving young mother and her husband.

I have always resisted poorly informed statements from people who might say:..... God did this! (When something bad happens.) I have never accepted that kind of theology; wanting to say instead, (when something bad happens) God does not do these things rather, when bad things happen, it is an opportunity for God's love to be seen and expressed. This grieving family had gone from being disparate and troubled, to being a gathered people through whom God's love would be poured into hearts of the young grieving mother and her husband.

Back into my vivid imagination (spiritual Visioning) in the context of this grieving family, a different image was emerging. In the here and now, a distant eschatology would not bring the same comfort that would spring from a realised eschatology. We now began to see an image in which the various members of the family, became people through whom God's love might flow.

And then there appeared a deeper insight. Each of the family members, in their love for the young mother, not only poured out love toward her, but now, newly created within their individual beings, was space into which the young mother could now enter to find solace and peace. This extended family itself, had become the symbolic mansions into which the grieving mother could enter and rest. The individuals of the this family were the many rooms.

Symbolically, this family had become the safe place to which the young mother could turn. Each of the family members, in their response of

Love, had created within their hearts a space into which the young mother could enter and heal. Did anyone mention the name of God? No they didn't, but as I looked on in prayer for them, I had no doubt in my mind, that God had acted in profound compassion. Each of the family members had become people through whom God's love was now flowing.

It does not have to be dramatic events like this family I have just described.

At this point, I feel that it is now time to say, that as a congregation, we are carriers of a tradition. It is a tradition that belongs firmly in the biblical story. As carriers of the tradition, we have a responsibility to provide safe haven and nurturing for those who while searching for that precious encounter, come into our midst. We need to be a people through whom God can minister to others. We need to be a people who are growing a sacred fellowship. That tugging we experience, means that we are called to be agents of his love.

There is a name for this. We are called to be in-carnational. We are called to receive and pass on God's Love. The religious catch-phrase for this, is Vehicles of the incarnation. If you grasped the significance of the Pastoral event I recounted, you could see yourselves collectively, as a community in which God is eternally present. Our roles includes individually having a space in our hearts in which to shelter those who while searching for that precious encounter, come into our midst.