

Whenever I am asked to say grace, the first prayer that always immediately comes to mind, but which I would never dare use, is the grace I once heard in an episode of *The Simpsons*. The Simpson family gather in their family home for an evening meal. Marge, the mother, asks Bart to say grace for the food. Bart says, "Dear God, we worked really hard for this food, so thanks for nothing." At that point, Homer, his father, grabs him by the neck, strangles him to within an inch of his life, shouting, "You stupid boy! How dare you speak to God like that!!" Bart's response is interesting, "Well," Bart says, "God hasn't done anything. We have. We're the ones who made the food."

Despite its humour, I think this comment says a lot about our culture, and interestingly about the way many Christians actually now think about God. From academic theologians, to priests, to the casual observer, to congregations; many people do not believe anymore in the concept of a directly intervening, acting God. Now this might sound strange to some, but it's important to recognise how far this questioning of God's intentionality has permeated the culture of faith as much as the more secular culture.

I once sat at dinner with a group of fellow newly ordained curates, in a reflection group for those new to ministry to reflect on issues affecting our contexts. There were a range of traditions and theological backgrounds represented at the table. During the conversation, one of our party expressed the view that in order to be a Christian yet alone ordained, there were certain things you simply had to believe in, and there was no getting round it. When the subject of the virgin birth, the miracles of

Jesus and the Resurrection came up, the host of the evening said that he believed such miracles were theological truths but not necessarily biological truths.

His words perplexed me. Either I was being daft and didn't understand the categories about which he spoke. Or an experienced priest had just essentially claimed that he wasn't entirely convinced that every miracle of Jesus actually happened the way The Bible said it did. Of course, Biblical interpretation leads us to questioning and exploring how certain truths work; which parts of Scripture we follow literally and others for which we might find a more intricate way of understanding. But on reflection what I think struck me more than anything, was the priest's use of the word "truth." I could understand what he meant by theological truth, but usually we speak more in terms of biological fact rather than truth. Even if he had perhaps mis-used his words, it reminded me that so many of the questions we have about God, about prayer, about faith itself, are about those core issues relating to how we perceive the truth and action of God within our objective, scientific and constantly questioning culture.

And it's a Church-old question, going right back to the first disciples. Today is the Feast of Peter and Paul. Although in our readings you might think it's all about Peter. In The Acts of The Apostles, we hear of how, following James' execution, Peter is released from prison to freedom by a group of God's angels. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says to Peter those famous words, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church." But we celebrate Paul with Peter, partly because historically June 29th

(or thereabouts) is said to be the date related to either the two Apostles' death and martyrdom, or the translation of their relics. In Eastern traditions, it also relates to the Apostles' Fast, where Christians would fast from the day after Pentecost to Peter and Paul's Feast Day, to embody the fast the first disciples made from their moment of commissioning to their departure from Jerusalem. So of course Paul is celebrated here, even though we heard much about him on the feast of his conversion in January.

In both Apostles' lives, we witness a similar dimension - despite their faltering, God does something to his people, for his people. Even when Peter loses his trust in Jesus, whether on the water, in denial, or today, in the face of death, Peter is set free by God. Even in the midst of anger, persecution and hatred, Saul becomes Paul, blinded, converted, transformed and renewed on the road to Damascus, to become one of the great leaders of the Church. God distinctively, decisively does something. God intervenes. God acts. And however we interpret these moments, the one thing that most certainly remains is God's decisive and definitive act for us, with us and in us. However we read these words, at the heart of the message is that definitive act and statement of God - God acts. The two questions which remain, that we perhaps should be asking, are: Do we believe this? And if so, how do we respond?

One of the things that Jesus has for his disciples, is trust. God trusts us. God loves us. God loves us so much that he even gave his life for us. He even gave us the freedom to follow him, the freedom to choose to follow him, even the freedom to choose not to. God acts first, God acts first for us and for all creation. It's up

to us to respond. And even when we doubt, when we question, the offer of grace and freedom is still there.

Paul was failing. He even persecuted those who believed in Christ. But God gave him another chance. Peter consistently fails. When you examine the disciples' lives, they're all pretty useless actually, and Peter certainly seems the most incompetent. But Jesus still asks him, "Who do you say I am?" And amidst the fear, the doubting and the trembling, Peter still finds the strength to say, "*You are the Son of God.*" Thus Jesus says, "*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.*"

Richard Dawkins once asked Rowan Williams *how* one could believe in the laws of nature and in a virgin birth. And Rowan responded by saying something of *who* we are and *who* God is. That, through prayer, preparation, Mary being open to God's calling which yielded God's presence in the world in a new way, it was not a contradiction to the laws of nature, but rather, "nature opening itself up to it's own depths."

Jesus builds his Church on Peter, and Paul, and on us. In *fact*, he builds it on the essence of faith, the essence of truth, the essence of trust, when we can say *who* God is. We all know what it means to have faith. We all know that we have to work for it. But it begins quite simply. If we can acknowledge who we are and who God is, simply accept and embrace who God is for who God is - *not how, but who* - there lies the truth of who we are and who God is with us. I wonder where God is in your life, and *how* you can show him *in who* you are?