

4th Sunday of Advent, 8.30am Holy Communion

‘This is the record of John’. If you’re a fan of English church music, and esp early modern English church music those words immediately evoke Orlando Gibbons enchanting setting of this Gospel, sung by a male counter tenor in haunting high pitch. Go home, turn up the volume, and search in YouTube ‘Gibbons, The Record of John’.

Truly God speaks through the works of men.

And that’s sort of what I wanted to speak about this morning, what comes out of today’s readings and this 4th Sunday of Advent on the brink of Christmas, and at the end of this strangest of years.

Drawing all those threads together I wanted to think briefly about: believing in the God who *is*, rather than *not* in the one who isn’t.

The Jewish priests and levites are quizzing John the Baptist – ‘art thou this, and that?’ Just as they will interrogate Jesus and ultimately reject Him, having found Him unsatisfactory.

It is one of the most common conversations I have with RS classes in school. ‘If God is God, then why this? Or that?’

‘Why isn’t the universe, or my life, like this? or that?’

It is a fair question. Our faith has questioning and wrangling at the heart of it. Jesus often responds to a question with more questions, not easy answers. Our faith is not a set of easy answers, but an invitation to a living transformative *relationship*.

Faith and doubt are partners in a living relationship.

But that isn’t quite what I mean.

For decades now we have been programmed in our very instincts and basic building blocks of self-understanding to be consumers. At our core, is the ability to scrutinise something, anything, decide whether we want or like it, and then either pick it off the shelf, or not. We do it with everything without even realising – work, relationships, ideas, philosophies. It’s so part of our being that we don’t even notice it. And we don’t notice that it is actually a new thing. For most of human history, and for most people in the rest of the world today that is not their reality. You are born a

carpenter's son, you will live and die a carpenter, within a few miles of the place you were born, subscribing to the social understandings of the society into which you were born. Life, for most, is not a matter of choice but allocation.

I'm not saying any of this is wrong or right; I'm just saying it *is*. And it is important to be aware of this reality within and among us. Not least its power over us, and its power over our lives and relationships, *especially our relationship with God*.

I can't tell you how many people I've met who say they can't believe in God because God is not or the world is not as they would make it. They find no reason to pick God of the shelf of life... as if our preferences bear any relation to God's *existence* or *non-existence*?

'Art thou Elijah?' 'Art thou the prophet?' they asked John 'Art *thou* the Christ?' They will ask Jesus.

'We don't like the look of you, you weren't what we were expecting and you aren't what we want'; and they weren't the children of decades of American Marketing men.

The God of Jesus Christ is not the God we want or choose. The universe we live in is not heaven, *yet*. It isn't one you or I would design.

But the point of our faith is not to choose a pet God, or design a fantasy universe like a giant episode of channel 4's Grand Designs.

It is to live honestly and with eyes open in the universe we *do* find ourselves in.

It is to live in a real and deep relationship with the God who *is* – the God who reveals Himself in Jesus. Mystery of mysteries, truth of truths.

John wasn't what they wanted, but he was right.

Jesus was no political hero come to kick out the Romans and establish a Jewish empire. He is the God who comes in the cries of a vulnerable baby. Who liberates not by conquest, not even sound management in today's terms, but by death itself, abolishes death.

We do not choose God, God is.

Advent is a time to get *real*, and we will discover if we meet the *real* God this Christmas, and begin a more real relationship with Him, that the truth of these

mysteries is more wonderful than *we* could ever conjure. And full of doubt and faith and real life (sometimes as if for the first time) we will see that the 'peace of God' truly does 'pass all understanding' and still somehow we cannot but be full of joy.