

Churches Together in Shirley
Lent 2013

Glimpses of God: Hope for Today's World
(An Ecumenical York Course)

"These are important issues not just for the Church, but for the whole World. If by thinking, talking, sharing views and maybe even praying your way through '*Glimpses of God*' you can find a little more confidence in engaging with others outside the Church community who are also seeking answers to these big questions - then this course will have achieved what it sets out to do." (Dr David Hope, Archbishop of York 1995-2005)



There are people for whom God is not fleetingly glimpsed but steadily and continually seen. Perhaps for most people, inside and outside the Church, the word **"glimpsed"** is a better description of their experience. Even for those with a fairly consistent sense of God's presence, there are special times when they are more aware of God...and those times aren't necessarily when things are going well. They can be when things are at their worst... When we are most conscious that God is most needed.

1. The God who hears our cry

We are more, and more immediately, aware of the world's disasters; and better placed than our predecessors to distinguish those which are fairly clearly something to do with man's inhumanity to man from those that get labelled as God's inhumanity to man (even by those who don't believe in God). "We live on an unpredictable planet in a purposefully random universe" - tectonic plates mean earthquakes, but if there weren't gaps between plates, life would soon die out. *A picture to focus on:* The people of Haiti celebrating an open air Mass amid the rubble of their capital city. *Some Bible references:* Luke 13.4, Exodus 3.1 - 4.17, Romans 8. *Never pray for God to solve a problem unless you are open to being part of God's solution:* Witness Moses, Eglantyne Jebb, Vincent de Paul, Desmond Tutu, Cicely Saunders, Chad Varah..... *The awkward question:* How can a good God be in charge of a cruel world? (St George's Brief Notes Number 4 "Disasters and Divinity" might be helpful - see parish website.) How do we handle compassion fatigue? What is the Church's role in being part of the solution for those who cry?

2. The Shepherd who guides and guards his people

The shepherd image of the 23rd Psalm (and found in a good many other places in the Bible) is less helpful at those who have never seen a shepherd, and who have no possibility of seeing one of the kind the psalmist and Jesus had in mind. But the modern substitutes (e.g. Social worker or probation officer) **really don't work. Earth your thinking in what the Bible shepherd actually had to do...and remember that the Bethlehem shepherds were quite possibly not even Jewish, and were certainly not the sort of people to be found in the front row of the synagogue. *A picture to focus on:* David dealing with the lion...or the modern Bethlehem shepherd on rubbish ground near the Israeli security wall. *Some Bible references:* Psalm 23, Matthew 28.20, John 10.11. *We do not mind our not arriving nearly so much as not having any company on the way:* Nothing in the Bible suggests that we are going to avoid going through dark valleys. The promise is that we will not be alone. *The victory of the cross is not a victory of power: it is a victory of anti-power.* *Questions:* How does God walk with us? Do we actually feel that he is with us? How can we practice our awareness of him? (Think Brother Lawrence.) Is Britain still a Christian country? (David Cameron says it is.)**

3. The Son who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

So, no room for non- **Christians then..or indeed for those who aren't quite in line with our version of the Way?** A stranger in Jerusalem asked an Arab the way to the Damascus Gate. The Arab said "I am the way", and led the visitor to the gate. The newly appointed Bishop of Chelmsford was asked "What is your vision?" He replied that he hadn't got one... But that he was doing his best to seek out God's vision. Where do we "find" God (or uncover God finding us): in creation? In scripture? In prayer? In church? In the people we meet? Pause a moment, and think about the sheer shock for a Jew of hearing a fellow Jew say "If you want to look at God, look at me". Maybe most of us would have to say "If you want to look at God, look away from me!" *A picture to focus on: Holman Hunt's Light of the World: Is the rather rusty and overgrown door in the picture (with no handle on the outside) the Church or you/me or both?!* *Some Bible references: John 14. 1-10, Luke 15.11-32, Revelation 3. 14-20. Two men please God - the one who serves him with all his heart because he knows him; and the one who seeks him with all his heart because he knows him not. (A Jewish Christian Ivan Panin)*

Questions: Could you invite a friend to church, confident that (s)he would find Jesus there? We probably all sign up to the idea that it is possible (essential?) to encounter the loving God in the loving neighbour; but what does this mean? Do you have a vision?

4. The God who shares our pain

The little boy heard the vicar declare at his friend's funeral that "God wanted another star in heaven". The little boy wanted to know why God couldn't just make another star, without killing his friend. He also knew enough cosmology to know that one small boy wasn't going to contribute much to the night sky. How do we answer the child in pain? In a hospice, the person with the drug trolley, the person with the tea trolley, and the person with the sacrament, have equal status. Christianity does use the word omnipotent for God, but Christianity (maybe Judaism?) declares that God suffers with us and for us, and suffering means being at the receiving end of pain and not being able to stop that pain.. Infinite agony: infinite love. *A picture to focus on: The tapestry of Christ in glory in Coventry Cathedral: half the face is beautiful/glorified; half is charred and disfigured. Some Bible references: Hebrews 12.2-3, Hebrews 4.14-16, Mark 14.35-36. While Jesus prayed in agony, his disciples went to sleep.*

Questions: Are we comfortable with saying “Thy will be done”? How do we know that God is listening? Suicide is the 13th most common cause of death worldwide (WHO) and the leading cause of death among men under 35 in the UK: Why? Is it good news that God shares our pain, or would we still much rather that he took it away?

5. The God who calms our fears

“Don’t be afraid” is a message that appears 365 times in the Bible. You can take that in two ways: 1) People are much inclined to fear, 2) God very much **wants them to know that they needn’t fear.** At a Bible study of Matthew 6, someone suggested that things Jesus urged us not to worry about - food, clothes, health - are the very things we do worry about, and not without reason. If you have a network of ordinary friends, you have probably over the years had call from friends who have run out of money for food, or clothes, or heating. Of course, they are worried! If, with Peter, we had stepped out of the boat onto the Lake surface, would we just have cantered to the shore whistling a happy tune? Pretending to be brave may not be a good thing. Acting as though you are brave may be a good thing; most VC winners were probably scared, but not scared stiff. *A picture to focus on:* The One seated upon the throne, and the Lamb bearing the marks of slaughter. *Some Bible references:* Mark 6.45-52, Matthew 6.34, Matthew 17.20. ***Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith: doubt is part of faith. The truth is that God doesn’t always calm our fears; neither should they be calmed....but with practice and prayer we can get things more in proportion.***

Questions: Is living in the moment a help to getting things in proportion? Can we hang on to the reality of God as Father, as well as Creator? Does it help that the psalms show a rich mix of fear and confidence?... Not much changed in that respect! Is fear inconsistent with trust?

There will be at least three Lent groups. Please make known your interest so that we can try to match provision with demand. Sessions in St George’s church will be on Sundays February 17th and 24th and March 3rd at 5 45p.m. (refreshments) for 6p.m. –7p.m. (The first 3 topics above.) Other churches invited. Other options include Monday evenings at 8p.m. at 185 Wickham Road: please book. If you want another evening, just say.