

THE GOD WHO MAY BE

[Inspired by and taken from "The God Who May Be" by Richard Kearney]

Rev Gordon Oliver

Sunday 10th September 2006

As we come back to our "home" here in Hout Street, our sacred place, I believe we have every reason to celebrate. SO much has been done to renew and restore this very old and very special building. A year ago, who would have imagined that we would be spending much energy and financial resources to refurbish our church building. As I have said a number of times, there is a valuable metaphor or symbolism for us in what we're experiencing by way of this building with much to think about as we look back on what has happened in the life of this congregation in material terms and the parallels we could draw in terms of the reality of the total human experience that makes us a community of people, spiritually, socially and organisationally. Things go wrong, we need to take corrective action, we need to think about what went wrong and to learn from that experience. There needs to be an outlay of resources and energy and a renewal and recommitment to changing. And better still, we commit to taking care, to being the best that we can be for ourselves and for others.

I could get quite creative in my thought process as I think of the hidden problem lurking in our midst in the form of growing dampness in these walls, causing pieces of plaster to fall off the wall into the organ, thereby threatening the wellbeing of the organ and our ability to experience the blessing of the music provided by Erina. Before long, the organ was fully incapacitated and we were forced to apply our minds to both the condition of the organ and the problem of the dampness in the walls. And, early in the process, all kinds of things happened! There arose from amongst us a body of people who took charge of sorting things out, making decisions, managing and supervising the process that before long became quite a challenging one, requiring good leadership and supervision, good judgement, strategic thinking and good organisation.....and generally being prepared to think of all possibilities, positive or negative, and to extend our thinking process beyond the actual problem that needed addressing to some creative thinking and decisions about this building in countless other ways. So I want to commend you all for the positive attitude you've demonstrated as a community, especially at our recent annual general meeting when you exercised good judgement in the context of the financial considerations pertaining to all that has been done and still needs to be done to this building.

I have a few more comments to make about this process of material and physical change that has been underway for some months in connection with this building as a sacred space. Firstly, this building stands as a living monument to our founding fathers and mothers, all those who have conceived of and given birth to a tradition over the last 138 years here in Cape Town, a tradition of liberal religious practice, and we honour all those who have kept that flame of liberal religion over the years. Countless numbers over nearly 14 decades have gathered here to offer homage and reverence to the God of their understanding, just as we do today,

people who have brought their hopes, their aspirations, their dreams and their struggles here to be blessed and to be embraced, free and safe from the pressures of imposed guilt and of the need to comply with outworn religious teachings.

Secondly, this building stands here today, (a little tired and drab in its appearance and that has started to change as we refurbish and renew our sacred space for the next phase of its usefulness and of its potential) as an opportunity for us, the community who gather here. The building's age and its sturdiness are its strength as it holds its place in the rich heritage of this city, standing as it does in the midst of a growing, changing, dynamic metropolis.....with all that that means in terms of its potential, and the future value of its role as a place which city dwellers and workers alike can use during the working week to enrich and ennoble their lives, culturally and spiritually.

But no building on its own has value, (other than financial value, but I'm not talking about that kind of value now), no building on its own has value and meaning in the context of its use **without people**.

So, we have a rich history of a community of people, who over the last 138 years have used this building to enrich and ennoble their lives, and who have kept this congregation going, remaining faithful and dedicated to a way of being religiously which has kept alive our liberal tradition.....and in very recent times, there has been a renewed surge of energy that has focused on this building, with a vision of how it can be put to better use so that we and future generations may hold aloft the light of progressive spirituality and thinking and the practice of time-honoured universal values.

The combination of a deeply committed people, on one hand, and on the other a gathering place that is attractive, appealing, inspiring and productively beneficial to those people who use it, speaks to me, and I hope to you, of enormous potential for the future of this congregation.

And it's in this vein that I want to bring you into my thinking concerning the individual, separate but shared spiritual paths on which we journey in terms of the "God of your understanding". For a long time now, I've referred to this concept, the "God of your understanding". But I want now to bring into your consciousness **the "God of Possibility"**.

I'm currently working my way through a book called "**The God Who May Be**", by Richard Kearney, who encourages us toward a change in our thinking of God as "actual", to thinking of God as "**the possibility of the impossible**". So, yes, God **IS** the God of our fathers, the God of creation and of history, but Kearney says "God is also a God who **possibilises our world from out of the future**."

The book refers, amongst others, to the story in Exodus 3:14, of Moses and the burning bush, when (Kearney p.20) "Moses meets his maker, while leading his sheep to the desert mountain of Horeb. He happens upon a voice speaking from the

midst of a flaming thornbush. From this fire which flares up without being extinguished, the voice of an angel calls and Moses answers 'Here I am'. The voice bids him to stand back and remove his sandals. And revealing himself as the Lord of his ancestors - of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - God says he has heard the cry of his people and has come to deliver them from bondage.

But it's not enough for Moses. Standing there under the midday sun, he wonders if this is not some strange mirage, some hoax. Perhaps the voice is an inner demon prompting him to a fit of madness. After all, wasn't it such a strange angel who appeared to Jacob late one night and shattered his hip, before disclosing the name of Israel? And wasn't it another elusive voice which summoned Abraham to Mount Moriah to murder his own son? That was a cruel command! A trick, of course, only a test of faith. He must tread carefully. Moses wasn't quite sure he wanted to do business with such a mercurial God: one who sent visitors to maim you in the middle of the night and commanded blood sacrifice, even if he wasn't really serious.

Moses longed for a God of justice and liberty. Someone who would remain faithful to his people. But who was *he* to question God - if this really *was* God, and not some counterfeit conjured up by his dizzy (sun-stroked) mind? He would have to proceed cautiously. So, instead of asking straight out: 'Who are *you*?' Moses puts it another way, the other way around: 'Who am I?' 'Who am I' he enquires, 'that I should go unto Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?' To which God replies, with a second, though still indirect revelation of himself: 'I will be with Thee'. The ancestral God is now declaring himself a *constant* God - one who will stand by Moses as he embarks on his mission to a promised land. Not only is the bush transfiguring itself but so too is the God who speaks through it. And it threatens to transfigure Moses too.

Still Moses is unsure; but he's beginning to like the sound of things. Is there perhaps more to this deity than meets the eye? Something more than the tribal divinity of his forbears? A hint of something new? And here's the core of my message to you today! Not just a God of ancestry, but a **God of advent (of things to come), a promise for the future.**

Emboldened by this surmise, Moses asks God, one last time, to reveal himself, to say who he really is, to disclose his name. Feet still bare on the hot sand, Moses takes a small step forward. He wipes perspiration from his forehead, and addresses the burning bush: 'When I come unto the children of Israel and shall say unto them, the God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name?, what shall I tell them? To which God responds, bolder and brasher this time, 'I am who is'. And he said, 'This is what you are to say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you'.

So there we have it. Holy Moses, a tired shepherd with a price on his head, dusty and parched after days of wondering about with his father-in-law's sheep in the desert, is confronted with an angel who eludes him, a fire that won't burn out, and a voice that answers his questions with a riddle! This divine self-definition which cannot be defined.....'I am who am' or 'I am he who is', unlike that

other name of God, 'Yahweh', the name in which God reveals himself as the divine I, this 'I am who am' or 'I am he who is' has a **strong sense of the verb to be**. I **AM** he who **IS**..... and then "I will **be** with you" this is a God of **BEING**, a God who really exists..... and who is also a **God of Promise**. And the author of my book says this may be seen as "the signature of **the God of the possible**, a God who refuses to impose on us or abandon us, traversing the present moment while opening onto an ever-coming future."

The now-retired Unitarian minister and scholar in Chicago, USA, Rev Dr William Murry, wrote a small publication called, "A Faith for all Seasons - Liberal religion and the crises of life" in which he describes God "as the creative power or life force within humankind, and all life, **that pushes and pulls life and the world towards health, growth, love and unity**. He says, "We understand this life force as that which engages with us and empowers us" God's power is the magnetic power of persuasion.

So, why am I telling you all this? Why this talk about God's name, and Moses there on that holy ground before the burning bush? As we as a community who meet here in this holy space, (well, it doesn't have a burning bush), we who have been confronted with some major challenges of late, in terms of repairs needed to our church building, and the changes that are now being introduced, a year ago we were far from the realisation that very soon we would have to make big changes and take some massive decisions, involving big expenditure and all the very human feelings of concern, apprehension, reluctance, resistance, caution, and so on.....and so it's in that very context that I'm hoping that you may be able to take into your consciousness yet another understanding of God as **The God Who May be**, the God of the possible, a God who opens out onto an ever-coming future, the God whose name may also be "Possibility of the Impossible". So often, we're hooked into a "can't do" mentality.....and something happens and we realise, "Yes, it's possible, we do have the resources and the ability to change, to grow, to transform".

Bill Murry, in his book, "A Faith for All Seasons", that book I referred to a moment ago, also tells us that God is not to be seen as an omnipotent, all powerful God who controls and determines everything in the Universe. Rather, God and humankind are in a partnership with each other. God can not be God without human beings being human! We are God's hands and feet.....and as such, we are indeed a part of all that is God and all that is good!

So, to wrap up, we celebrate this sacred place as we, the community of this church work to refurbish, to enhance, to beautify and to sanctify this church building, and in so doing we have the possibility of understanding the metaphor and the lesson that this offers us as a community and as individuals in our own spiritual lives, doing the same, cherishing our values, renewing our commitment to those ideals we cherish, restoring and healing our relationship with God, with ourselves and with others, re-dedicating ourselves to a life of gentle goodness, wholeness and joyful living.

So, hold the questions and the possibilities as you ponder upon the God who may be, as you experience in your own life the God of the possible, the God of promise and potential, not just a God of history but a God of advent (of things to come), and a promise for the future.

So, "look to this day! For it is life, the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence: The bliss of growth, The glory of action, the splendour of beauty; For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision; But today well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day." (From *Singing The Living Tradition - Unitarian Book of Songs and Prayers* # 419)

And may the God of possibility be more than possible in your lives, always and in all ways!

So may it be!

Acknowledgments

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