

## IS GOD AN IDEA OR A RELATIONSHIP?

Isaiah 40: 21-31; Mark 1: 29-39

‘How can you have voted Conservative?!’ Jasmine just couldn’t believe her brother Brad could do such a thing. Jasmine was an activist, more specifically, an environmental activist. “They’re going to go soft on any of Canada’s commitments and responsibilities to reduce greenhouse gases. They’re more concerned about generating profits from fossil fuels than about the environment, which affects the whole planet.” “Yes but what about the average working Canadian?” Brad responded. “They care about getting money into the hands of those who are struggling to make a living but are saddled with too many taxes and too much government complicating their lives.” Jasmine couldn’t believe her brother’s ignorance. She had tried to show him the truth. She had tried to convert him to her ideas. But he was so stubborn and resistant. He was a corporate lawyer, far too tied to his Bay Street connections, his stocks, his luxury SUV, and his upper-middle class life. As time went on, she and Brad had less and less in common. In fact, it was hard for them to talk about much before they came into conflict.

For Brad, the issue was one of tolerance and acceptance. He could respect his sister’s values, even though he believed they were extreme. She was his sister and he appreciated her passion and her principle. The relationship was more important than the ideas. She was his sister and nothing would change that. Jasmine, on the other hand, could not accept the compromising ways of her brother and his corporate values. It was values such as these that had brought the world to the current crisis it was in. Either he started changing, or she would have little choice but to cut herself off. Her ideas went beyond a particular relationship with her brother. It was a matter of life and death, the fate of the whole planet. She couldn’t compromise for the sake of “being nice.” That was a luxury the world could not afford. Brad wanted to ignore the larger reality. She could not compromise her values and pretend all was ok. There were people throughout the world who were living through floods and fires. How much denial would rich people around the world indulge in before the evidence about our climate crisis was clear? Our high class lifestyle was decimating the planet and eventually everyone would pay. The price for caring was confronting people with the truth. If the price was a relationship, so be it!

Well, who do you identify with more? Personally, while I share Jasmine’s values, her stance troubles me. Why? Well, on the one hand, it is true that in a selfish world, it’s easy to compromise ideas and values for the sake of just getting along with people and just living easy with a bad situation as long as it doesn’t affect you, your family and friends too directly. On the other hand, who is really served if we polarize and alienate people with our ideas and values, as important as they are, until they won’t listen to us anymore? Isn’t the goal persuading people rather than shutting them down?

Well, I guess we all struggle in different ways, don’t we? Depending on who we are, what we have been taught, what we have experienced as we have grown, what our lifestyle choices have been and continue to be, depending on all this and so much else, we have ideas and we have ways of relating. We have our politics and our values.

As Christians, we are obligated to place the number one value on love – love for God which lives itself out as love for others and love for the earth and all its creatures. So far, so good.

But which policies, which ideas and which perspectives best serve such love? How is reform and renewal best undertaken? Do we get tougher on crime or invest more resources on building community and building up our social system of health, community services, and educational opportunities for all regardless of their financial means? How far do we prioritize the rehabilitation of the environment so that we restrain life-style choices that don't comply with such rehabilitation? On the other hand, how far do social and environmental priorities get enforced before they work against a population's productivity and welfare so that people give up individual initiative and entrepreneurship, burdened by regulations and taxes?

O.K. O.K. I'm going on and on a bit, but what is the point? The point is that unless our ideas grow out of a relationship, the ideas lose their capacity to convict and generate support. Ideas are essential, yes. But relationships are the reason why we need ideas in the first place. And I say this not only because of the trouble we have as human beings in our relationships. I say this because we are often confused about the fact that Christianity is first and foremost about relationships before it is about ideas. What do I mean?

Let us dive into our scripture readings. Isaiah's prophecy tells us of a God whose ways are much greater than anything we can fathom. Here is what we read: "Why do you say, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?' Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless... those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

This prophecy is spoken at a difficult time for Israel. The people are overwhelmed and exhausted by their misfortunes piled one on top of the other. And in their misfortune, they question God's power and presence to walk them through to the other side. But the prophecy tells them not to be paralyzed by fear. God will come to those who wait. God will come and renew their endurance and their strength so that they will fly, even after life's misfortunes.

But more than this, the prophecy puts the focus on the relationship of the people with God. God is not simply an idea. In fact, all ideas we have about God must be put to the test. God is greater than any human ideas. Who can fully exhaust an understanding of the heights and depths of love? Who can fully know God or even another human being through the ups and downs of a life-time? Mystery is much greater than understanding when it comes to relationships, and no human idea can exhaust all the truth and beauty that exists.

But with a relationship, you don't have to understand it all. You don't have to understand a person fully to have a relationship with them. You don't have to know everything there is to know about a tree to have a relationship with it. Relationships are about trust and love. You can trust another even though

you can't know everything about them. You can appreciate and love another even if they don't fit into any one box.

And this is very much so the case with God also. As Christians, we are not called to believe in a God we know little about. No. At the same time, however, we are called to trust a reality far greater than we are, and far beyond anything we can fully understand. God is the ground of all there is. God is the source of goodness, beauty and truth, wherever it is to be found. But these are statements based on faith, not scientific evidence. These are statements that grow out of a relationship with the great Other we call God who permeates all there is. This relationship of faith also breeds hope, an openness to what's possible. It inspires love for others because life is seen as purposeful, worthwhile, a gift to be treasured and cared for, no matter how fractured or broken it may be.

And everything we have predicated about God is also applicable to Jesus. In our gospel reading, Jesus has just called disciples to follow him. Do they know who he really is? He goes around healing and releasing people from their demons. Who is he really? And when the disciples try to pin him down and keep him in one place, he tells them this: "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

And even though the disciples don't have a clear idea of who Jesus really is or what he has come fully to do, they follow. The reason? They have been stirred inside. They have been inspired, awakened, opened to something. What is this something? They cannot fully explain it, but they trust it, they trust Jesus. Indeed, their love is stirred as they witness his love for people, his compassion, his commitment to heal and be attentive to the nobodies of the world. This is the person they witness, and so, they know something about him, but not everything. Their ideas are in flux. But their relationship with Jesus is taking them on a journey, a journey of self-discovery and a journey of discovery of what in life truly matters.

And what does all this have to do with you and me? It has to do with our relationship with God and how we understand relationships with others. There is a mystery to every being. How much more, then, is there a mystery to the reality we call God who surrounds and energizes all that lives? As Christians, we have the audacity to claim that we can have a personal relationship with this "All", this God. But we can never claim to base our relationship on understanding alone. We know what we need to know. By faith, we trust and feel that all that is, is good and has come out of love. We trust and feel that our deepest essence, that part of us we can discern past the anger and frustration, the tears and the hurt, the anxiety, fear, cynicism, indifference... past all that, way deep down, we trust and feel that our essence is love. And because our essence is love we are made for relationship.

If we anchor our being to a relationship with God, the All, then chances are this will affect the way we build and develop relationships with those around us, including the earth and its creatures...

Ok, so what happens with Jasmine and Brad? Will Jasmine find a way to see the beauty, truth and goodness in her brother Brad, even though his values and ideas are false to the truth as she sees it? Will Brad be open to his sister's ideas through the love and respect he has for her? Or will their polarization

close them down to each other so that nobody is listening, so that there is no mystery of truth to be discovered beyond what is on the surface of our frustrations and judgements?

May we find new ways, through the ups and downs of life, through the uncertainties and the achievements, the fears and the successes; may we find new ways to infuse our lives with love's demands. May we become more attentive, sensitive, open, gracious, loyal, committed and honest. That is what others deserve. That is what we deserve. That is what our earth and all its creatures deserve. That is what God has made us for. If God is the power and energy flow of love, than God must be known in relationship not as an idea. We can describe God in words, but only as we experience God in our hearts and in the in-between of relationships, is God truly alive. What do you think?

Prayer: Come to us, O God... flow through us... live between us and all life we encounter around us... As we grow in our openness and capacity to give love and receive love, may we know you at the centre... Amen.