

# A World of Paradox:

*What it means to live in God's world*

Our reflection begins with an insight and an implicit challenge:

**that when a person crosses the threshold of the kingdom of God, they enter a world of paradox:**

a world into which you must stoop to enter;  
 where the first are last, and the last are first;  
 where the satiated go away hungry, and the empty leave filled to the brim;  
 a place where what is considered foolish is wise, and what is wise foolish;  
 where adults must become child like;  
 where crying is the pre-requisite to laughter;  
 mourning the door way to comfort;  
 where what we consider insubstantial is palapable, the impossible laughable;  
 and where to be forgiven, you must forgive.

If there were someone at the entrance to meet us, they would probably say what Morpheus says to the bewildered Neo in *The Matrix*:

*"Welcome to the real world".*

Because, let's be honest, those of us who pride ourselves on a common sense 'practical' piety, tend to be dismissive of the kind of 'spirituality', 'religion', times of 'revival' we hear spoken about in this Gospel story of John the Baptist.

In the cold light of a materialistic day the whole scenario seems so far away, so remote, so unreal — so bizarre: a voice from the sky, a dove descending, a man dressed in camel skin eating wild locusts and honey telling you to dunk yourself in a dirty river out in the desert so that you can be clean — asking you to tell all, enough to make even a Gerry Springer blush.

**But that's because by and large we inhabit a world that spends most of its time running away from reality and from the truth.**

It comes as a shock to realise that God's world, whenever it intersects our own, turns everything upside down:

***Then we realise that it's God's world that's the real world,***

***and not ours, which is so often***

***an illusion,  
 a fake  
 and a sham.***

**For when God's reality penetrates, collides with our carefully constructed social, political and economic fairytales, we can expect exposure (of an order of magnitude far greater than Wikileaks and far more accurate)**

**and if we are willing (and only if we are willing) we experience an amazing transformation.**

The reason why we seldom see times of revival like that of John the Baptist, or a Pentecost or any one of the thousands of Pentecosts that have followed since,

**is because we live in an escapist culture where the ‘reality’ of God is seldom acknowledged and mostly unrecognised.**

So much so we become attuned to that culture, even if we believe in God, and discover to our great sadness, that our spiritual sensibilities have been blunted.

So every now and again God has to break into the world as he does in this moment when Jesus approaches John to be baptised:

*Suddenly the heavens are torn apart and he sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven saying, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’.*

It is ever so easy to dismiss those two descriptive sentences as St Matthew’s **rhetorical flourish** to persuade his believing community that something important has happened to launch Jesus’ ministry.

But we must understand that *language* always struggles to express what it is that has been experienced, what was meant, what was seen and heard that was so life changing.

**Just because words are approximations doesn’t discount the reality of the experience, or the reality of the event.**

**Let us be clear about that.**

The images which Matthew uses to describe this amazing moment in time, act like a prism to convert the pure light and reality of the experience in such a way that we see it in its true colours.

**The simple, and maybe not so simple fact is, that the heavens were opened to Jesus because he was attuned to the possibility, waiting for it, open to it, attentive to it.**

Not distracted like so many of us are, by so many things.

Or maybe, more accurately,

**Jesus lived this reality all the time,**

**and just occasionally let it shine through for the benefit of those who happened to be around him at the time,**

**because as TS Eliot comments in a different context, we cannot ‘bear too much reality’.**

Let me read that phrase again in its context – it’s from the poem ‘Burnt Norton’ the first of the Quartets:

*Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,  
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,  
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,  
The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.  
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.  
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,  
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.  
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality.*

*Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.*

The truth is that the kingdom of heaven is all around us, all of the time waiting for us to enter it ***intentionally*** (there's the important pre-requisite) with our minds, our spirits and our actions.

The bird in Eliot's poem hears and sees what we in our plastic, spiritually deprived culture cannot see, cannot hear; it experiences a fecundity and a richness that is interposed and hidden from others by the aridity, emptiness and concrete starkness of their own making.

But the question remains —

Why cannot we bear 'too much reality'?

**Is it perhaps because it snaps into focus the nature and extent of our spiritual bankruptcy, and that is an unsettling experience we would rather not have?**

For the kingdom of heaven is:

not 'up there'  
but 'down here'  
not some time in the future  
but 'right here, right now',

if we would only see it, and hear it and allow ourselves, as children at heart, to experience it, we live in a sacramental universe, where God is both *immanent* and *transcendent*.

**And that calls for a change of heart and mind, which in theological terms, is designated as a call to 'repentance',**

**and this  
and only this  
will bring about a change of direction in our lives.**

**'God moments' are all around us if we stop and pay attention to them.**

**It is *then* that we can hear, and see and feel and know the kingdom of God, the domain of God, God's world.**

But know what?  
See and hear what?  
Experience what?

That God is for us and not against us;  
that his disposition towards us is to be pleased with us;  
that we are beloved of God

(which goes against the grain of so much fundamentalist doctrine that preaches 'grace' but cripples and stunts believers with its constant diet of sin and falling short, creating burdens that no one can bear, and standards that no one can live up to);

that God is with us and will never abandon us;  
that God will not lose his temper as we often do with one another ('*a bruised reed he will not break*');

that God has no favourites —  
 that *everyone* is special in God's eyes,  
 that all are loved, even our enemies .

That to believe any other kind of reality than God's reality is idolatry, as Isaiah the prophet is quick to note.

The true glory and magnificence of the reality of God cannot be replaced – and any attempt to attribute the ultimate source of all power to anything else, or anyone else, is pure counterfeit, as false and seductive as the world of *The Truman Show*.

So what does a God moment, a revival, a pentecost, the domain of God look like when it shows itself in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries?

Sometimes, it such a fleeting moment:

### Example 1

**Liam's experience in his preparation for confirmation that made him realise God was real:**

The bullied 3<sup>rd</sup> class boy who got out from under the dust where he had been thrown, who looked his bully in the eye and said

*"You know lots of people want to like you and love you, but you won't let them."*

Other times, it is:

### Example 2:

**A six year old forgiving his father as an atheist, and then at the age of sixty-four forgiving his estranged now Bible believing father again, only, ironically, this time the father doesn't think he needs to be forgiven.**

Which brings us to our final observation.

**That all revivals, God moments, pentecosts, are anticipated and steeped in intentional prayer.**

Every time we pray 'Our Father' asking God's kingdom to "come on earth as it is in heaven", we are effectively inviting the reality of God's world to interpenetrate our individual, family, community, national and international economic, social and political affairs — far beyond the confines of the walls of any church.

God challenges us every day of our life, to bring the reality of his presence into the experience of the moment.

### Example 3:

**In 1949 in the Scottish Hebrides two women Peggy and Christine in their eighties, one blind, the other crippled, prayed that the Isle of Lewis would experience the reality of God.**

The outcome of those prayers was a minister who was caused to stop midstream in his ineffectual sermon not just because he was getting nowhere fast, but because a young farmer, a recent convert to Christianity was crying.

Duncan Campbell, the minister was moved to ask the young man to pray. Just three sentences, and heaven came down on that congregation that day.

As a church and soon as a whole community the experience of God became increasingly real and palpable.

**So real that services were held in the evenings at 7, 10, midnight and 3 am every day for months on end to accommodate the crush of people hungry for that reality in their lives.**

**Here is how Campbell and others describe what happened:**

*The Spirit of God was resting wondrously and graciously on the different townships in the parish. You could feel God's presence in the homes of the people, on meadow and moorland and even on the public roads.* (Parish Minister of Barvas)

*The awareness of God is the supreme characteristic, the supreme feature of a God sent revival. Seventy five percent of those who came into the church in their hundreds came before they heard a single sermon.* (Duncan Campbell)

One of the praying women, having seen visions from God, called in the minister and this is what she said:

*Give yourselves to prayer... spend at least two nights a week waiting upon God in prayer... I and my sister will pray from 10 until 2 or 3 in the morning.*

The revival under John the Baptist must be understood in the context of many who will one day be known to us who prayed day and night like Anna and Simeon in the temple for God to come among his people. And God heard and answered those fervent prayers.

Soon we will formally exercise our own commitment to intentional prayer the details of which are on our website in the form of the SOS 24/7 praying community.

I urge you to read the material and be part of the eventual realisation of a visible praying community in this church 24 hours a day. And who knows what will flow from it.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a poem (Aurora Leigh Book VII)

warily observes:

*Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.*

And Parker Palmer in his *The Promises of Paradox*, a celebration of contradictions in the Christian life writes, quoting William Johnston: *Faith is the breakthrough into that deep realm of the soul which accepts paradox ... with humility.*

Let us pray:

**The voice of the LORD**

is upon the waters,  
glory thunders  
upon the mighty waters  
a powerful voice;  
the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.

the voice of the LORD breaks  
splits the flames of fire;

the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;  
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

Ascribe to the LORD, you gods,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his Name;  
worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.  
And in the temple of the LORD cry "Glory!"

Amen