

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. John 14.9.

A friend recently lent me a copy of John Humphry's book, *In God we doubt: Confessions of a failed Atheist*. Many of you will know John Humphrys as the Rottweiler who savages politicians on Radio 4's *Today* programme. For years Humphrys has been tormented by a problem that will not go away, and, just as with his interviewees, he is not easily fobbed off with glib answers. His problem is that he was brought up in a Welsh church-going home. He was confirmed and genuinely wanted to believe. Yet as he grew up questions nagged him. The terrible disaster of Aberfan in the 1960s which he reported on naturally shattered his belief in a good, loving, and powerful God. And yet he still wanted to believe. So he got the Abp of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi, and an imam on to radio and said, 'Convince me. I genuinely want to be convinced'. Hence his book, *In God we doubt; Confessions of a failed Atheist*.

Humphrys rightly notes that very few people are outright atheists. Most, like him, simply don't know; they are agnostics. Most believe in something vague 'up there', some Supreme Power. For nearly fifty, he prayed but he finally gave up because he didn't really know who he was praying to.

The problem was that I had absolutely no notion of the God to whom I was supposed to be praying, or, for that matter, why I was praying.

I wonder if that is your experience, if you are honest. As we prepare this morning to gather around this communion Table I want us to think about who we are actually praying to. When you think of 'God', what do you picture in your mind? I think that John Humphrys speaks for many people.

And the reason, I firmly believe, is that the instruction and preaching that he got as a child and young man were not Christ-centred enough. To caricature - there would have been a lot of talk about God, this vague God, somewhere up there, and a lot of talk about Jesus who went about doing good and who is the example that we should all follow. Does that all sound familiar? But no-one connected the two, yet it was a connection which Jesus himself made here in *Jn14.9*, our text today: 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. It's not an easy connection to make. The disciples who had been with Jesus day in and day out for three years didn't make it. To doubting, sceptical Thomas Jesus said in v7, 'If you *really* knew me, you would know my Father as well'. Philip then asks, 'Shew us the Father'. Jesus replies, 'If you have seen me, you have already seen the Father'. It's a staggering claim.

But then, so is 10.10: 'I and the Father are one'. St Paul makes the connection in *Col1.15*: 'He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God'. The letter to the Hebrews also has it: 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory, the *exact representation of his being*'. Wow! If John Humphrys had been taught *this*, he would not be wondering, 'But who am I praying to?' The Bible makes it very clear that God *is* invisible. He *is* inconceivable, precisely because he is infinitely greater than our limited human minds. He *is* hidden. The Bible actually calls God a 'hidden God' in *Is45.15*. So Humphry's experience of not being able to picture God is *biblically* spot-on. But the Bible makes clear that that is not the whole story. It goes on to say that God actually *reveals* himself to us and he

does this supremely in Jesus Christ, so that, as he himself said, 'If you have seen *me*, you have seen the Father'.

So why were preachers in Humphry's day (and today) so reluctant to point out the scripture passages that I have just shewn you? The painful truth is that the churches over the past years have been very *fearful* of Jesus. Sure, we can paint him as a great moral example, teaching sublime truths, doing good and being ever so loving but who tragically got caught out by the powers-that-be. That is a safe Jesus who doesn't threaten anyone. But it's not the Jesus of the NT. The NT tells us that Jesus actually died for sinners. But, you see, to preach *that*, the ministers would have to tell their congregations and the world that they were sinful, and that would *never* do, would it? The other thing, of course, is that *if* it is true that whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father, then it also follows that whoever has *not* seen Jesus has *not* seen the Father. So where does that leave the Muslims who don't accept Jesus as fully God? Where does that leave the Hindus, and the Jews who don't accept Jesus as God's promised Messiah? You can see that we've got a problem here if we pursue this. Better keep quiet then!

You might avoid the problems that arise from exclusive claims, but the trouble is that a) you misrepresent the NT and ultimately God himself, because this Jesus is not some unnecessary add-on, and b) you deprive people like John Humphrys who now can't picture God or be sure of who they are talking to in prayer.

Thankfully, I don't have his problem because I know and

and take seriously Jesus's own claim in scripture: 'whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. And I can see Jesus. I can read the four Gospels, and I can see what he did, and hear what he said. I have no reason to believe that the Gospel writers were a bunch of liars or nutcases who were trying to work a massive con on us all. When I read the Gospels I see Jesus healing people. He does that a) because he cares and b) because he is more than human; he is divine and has authority and power over illness. His healing the sick tells me that God *also* wants us to be well. I see Jesus forgiving sins; that tells me that God *also* yearns to free us of our guilt and shame. I see Jesus raising the dead, like Lazarus. Again, this points to Christ's divinity, because humans can't do this. It tells me that God *also* wants to raise us from the dead. I see Jesus dying for the undeserving; that tells me a great deal about God. So when I pray to God, I can picture him. I can open my Bible and see and hear Jesus. What *he* does is what God does. His ways are God's ways. 'I and the Father are one'.

Our churches are dying in western Europe, and so long as they continue to play down the incomparable Christ and to misrepresent him, they justly well deserve to die. But here in St Paul's we are going to continue to focus on the Lord Jesus. He is the lens, given by God himself, through whom we see God. If you're not looking at Jesus, you're not looking at God, but at a false god, an invention of the human mind. You can know God by knowing Jesus. You can know Jesus personally by reading your Bibles. And by knowing Jesus you can know the God to whom you are praying; 'whoever has seen me has seen the Father'.