

The Freedom of God

The sermon given at Evensong, on 8th September 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Isaiah 43:14-44:5

The Old Testament sees idolatry as the great enemy of human freedom. The worship of false gods is a commitment to something unreal, and in that sense, is a form of voluntary imprisonment. You can't be truly free if you are in denial about what is real.

Idolatry is usually the result of wanting a god or gods who will do our bidding: If you want your crops to grow, you need a god of fertility; if you need to defeat your enemies, you need the god of war on your side; if you need forgiveness, then you need a god who will provide it in exchange for sacrifices.

The point is, these gods get shaped in response to human need. They are a reflection of human needs and desires, projected onto a cosmic canvas.

This was the argument of the nineteenth century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, that all religion was just a form of wish-fulfilment – a projection of our deepest desires created in response to human need. The gods don't really exist; they only exist because we believe we need them. As small children, we feel more secure if we know we have a loving father watching out for us and protecting us. As adults, we feel more secure if we believe there is an infinitely powerful loving god watching over the universe. Religion is just a scaled-up version of a child's need to be looked after.

Feuerbach's argument carries a lot of force. But where it breaks down is when you can point to elements of a religion that aren't cosy and self-serving. One of the best places to find such elements is in the Hebrew prophets, who time and again present God in opposition to His people, making demands of them that they are unwilling to fulfil, often inviting them to trust and obey against their better judgement.

So the commandment against graven images is a command not to reduce God to the limits of human imagination; the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy is an

attack on the human instinct to reduce the earth to a commodity whose sole purpose is to be consumed and exploited as we think fit; the commandments to welcome the alien and the stranger, to leave enough of the harvest for the poor, and to destroy the shrines of false gods, all challenge and undermine the instinct to look after our own interests and to restrict our responsibilities to a small and easily defined group.

The Hebrew prophets have no interest in a God who is merely shaped in response to the hopes and aspirations of their people.

Our first reading is a good example of this. Much of the passage from Isaiah 43 reads like a wonderful piece of wish-fulfilment: addressed to the exiles in captivity in Babylon, the prophet promises that the Lord 'will send to Babylon and break down all the bars and the shouting of the Chaldeans (i.e. Babylonians) will be turned to lamentation.' He promises that He will do a new thing, bring them home, renew the land, and pour out His Spirit upon them. It's all very lovely and just the sort of thing that the exiles would long to hear.

So far, so Feuerbach!

But embedded in the middle of it all is a remarkable phrase:

²⁵ I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.'

And it comes in the middle of a section in which the prophet is reminding the people of their sins and iniquities, and of how they don't deserve to be forgiven.

So this promise of God's forgiveness is actually pretty devastating. It's not because the people didn't deserve to be driven into exile. Neither is it because the people have repented and begged for forgiveness. The offer to blot out their transgressions has actually got nothing to do with them at all. God says, '*I am He who blots out your transgressions **for my own sake.***' God's forgiveness isn't a response to anything. It's simply the result of God being true to Himself. Human need is irrelevant. God forgives because for Him not to forgive would mean Him ceasing to be God.

It's good to be reminded of this whenever we talk about God being the God of love. The danger of that is that when we talk about God loving us, we imagine He somehow needs us. But passages like this remind us that God's love is bigger than that: His love is not human love. He doesn't love because He needs us and is desperate to smooth things over between us. He loves because He has to maintain His own integrity, and His first duty is to be true to Himself. *'I am He who blots out your transgressions **for my own sake.**'*

This reminds us that God is not our creation or projection, neither is He our possession. He remains utterly, incomprehensibly free. And it is precisely that freedom from us, from any claim His creatures might make upon Him, that makes Him worthy of our praise.

God isn't a projection of our deepest desires and needs. God is God, and in His freedom lies our salvation, because He's not tied to us at all, and is forever surprising, forever new, never predictable, never closed down, never answerable. We take Him as He is or not at all.

Which is why Christian faith ends up not with commandments, not with morality and good works, not with theology, but with praise. There at last we see the creature coming before the creator with no agenda and no attempt to bargain, but simply to reflect back to God the freedom of His own being, the freedom which sets us free.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 43:14-28

43 ¹⁴ Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation. ¹⁵ I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. ¹⁶ Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. ²² Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! ²³ You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honoured me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense. ²⁴ You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. ²⁵ I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. ²⁶ Accuse me, let us go to trial; set forth your case, so that you may be proved right. ²⁷ Your first ancestor sinned, and your interpreters transgressed against me. ²⁸ Therefore I profaned the princes of the sanctuary, I delivered Jacob to utter destruction, and Israel to reviling.

44 ¹ But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! ² Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you: Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. ³ For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. ⁴ They shall spring up like a green tamarisk, like willows by flowing streams. ⁵ This one will say, "I am the Lord's," another will be called by the name of Jacob, yet another will write on the hand, "The Lord's," and adopt the name of Israel