

## **Faith and imagination: A Sermon for Jesus College Oxford 27 January 2019**

Psalm 74.1–17

Readings Genesis 32.22–32; Luke 20.9–25

Every New Year for some years now, my husband and I have stayed with friends – Adrian’s best man and his wife, and their two teenage children, Adrian’s godchildren. It has become a tradition that on New Year’s Day we go to the cinema. And this year we saw *Mary Poppins Returns*.

There’s a moment early on (and I won’t spoil it for you) when she is trying to persuade the children to take a bath. And she sings a song – it is a musical, after all – with the reiterated question “Can you imagine that?” She challenges the children to revalue their own seriousness and the seriousness of the world around them.

Some people like to laugh at life,  
And giggle through the day  
They think the world's a brand new shiny toy  
And if while dreaming in the clouds  
They fall and go kersplatt  
Although they're down and bent in half  
They brush right off and start to laugh  
Can you imagine that?

Can you imagine that there might be some value in playfulness, in imagination?

Sometimes imagination gets a bad press. It’s the kind of put down civil servant Sir Humphrey might say to Jim Hacker in the sitcom “Yes Minister”: “how imaginative, minister”. Or indeed the response of a tutor to an essay, if your astonishingly new view on something can’t be as well-founded as you might like. “Imaginative, but wrong”. You might all be sitting there looking like you’re listening right now but in fact lost in a completely different world in your imagination. Which wouldn’t be ideal from my point of view but perhaps vastly preferable from yours.

Imagining, imaging, and creating images, has not always been valued in the Church either. The very making of images came in for violent scrutiny at the

Reformation. Paintings or reliefs of heaven and hell, angels and demons, saints and sinners and God, got whitewashed or hacked down from ancient and beautiful churches across England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. All because of an early English translation of Deuteronomy 5:8 - the Ten Commandments – that read “Thou shalt make thee no graven image or any likeness of that that is in heaven above, or which is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters under the earth.” Which sounds like a straightforward prohibition against creating images, taken out of context: but then you read on and realise it’s above all about being aware of, and avoiding, any way each generation creates idols and worships futile things. Moses – who received the Ten Commandments – was not dissing art and craftsmanship. The details he goes into elsewhere about various beautiful holy furnishings show he did care about his people’s skills in imaging things that were shrouded in divine mystery. He just wanted to make sure people weren’t wrongly distracted away from the true God.

In the Psalm the choir sang earlier, 74 if you want to look it up, there was a description of the horror of the smashing up of the Jerusalem Temple by the Babylonian armies in 586BC. The Psalmist invites us to imagine the disrespectful soldiers hacking the carved panelling to pieces and burning what was left. In fact, the Psalmist above all wants *God* to see it again and again, so he might avenge the wrongs done to his beloved people. The Psalmist is good at seeing it in his mind’s eye, and causing others to imagine it. And this is just one example of how the Old Testament uses imagination to convey meaning and depth.

C. S. Lewis once said that “imagination is the organ of meaning”, because it is the source of all metaphors.<sup>1</sup> And lots of the language we use – religious or not – uses metaphor. Arguments, for instance, are things we “construct”, we need good “foundations” or “building blocks” – see how we have a metaphorical concept that THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS? We image, we imagine something to help us understand it, to help others understand what we’re saying. Metaphors can help us explore things. Images can help us make sense of things.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Bancewicz, *God in the Lab*, p.104

And Jesus got that. That's why he tells so many stories. He invites his hearers to imagine. Today we heard how he got his audience to imagine a vineyard, where the tenants wouldn't give the owner the fruits of the vine to which he was entitled. First, they refused to give the grapes to his servants. Next, they refused to give them to the owner's son – and then thought they'd even kill that son to shut their owner up and to stage a takeover bid. Jesus is telling this to some strict Jews who wanted to catch him out – but by telling a story, creating an image, inviting imagination, he can really eyeball his listeners. Those strict Jews think Jesus is wrong because he's telling lots of people all sorts of things about God that don't fit their zealous religious beliefs. But here Jesus doesn't explicitly even mention God: he helps them imagine God as the owner of the vineyard; he leads them to imagine themselves as the self-entitled tenants. So by word and image, Jesus draws them to see the danger they are in if they don't respect the servants and eventually even the son of the divine vineyard owner.

And then it's using images that he gets another point about God over, and that he avoids another trap they're trying to set him. They ask whether they should pay their taxes to Caesar. Should the faithful Jew really be obedient to the pagan Emperor at all costs? If Jesus says yes, they could say he is aligning himself with the Emperor who wants them to be his subjects: more than that, his worshippers. If he says no, they could accuse him of treason and stirring unrest, so that the Roman Governor could punish him.

But Jesus asks them to get a coin out and look at it. It's got the image and the name and titles of the emperor on it. "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus Caesar." Images of course for the zealous Jew are suspicious in the first place. And Tiberius' claim to his own divinity through his father who was "made" a god of the Roman people, would have made this even more distasteful. And Jesus can now say "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Clever chap, our Jesus. But why should we be surprised that he is using an image? Yes, he's a devout Jew, but above all he wants to challenge zealous religiosity and narrow-mindedness. He's not afraid of an image. *Of course he's not.* He's the Son of God. The Son of the Creator. The one who was actually there right at the beginning. He's the very source of creativity. Some Christians

think that having an imagination is part of what it means for us human creatures to be made “in the image of God”.<sup>2</sup>

We are called to imagine faithfully. Appropriately, Archbishop Justin’s recent book, is about “reimagining” our society. Imagining faithfully is not to fantasize unrealistically about God, life, the universe; but to be creative in our thinking; to be prepared always to see differently. Rowan Williams describes how Jesus helps people see differently. And above all, when Jesus is there, people see *themselves* differently.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps that means that as you imagine Jacob wrestling with the angel in our first reading today, you can imagine things that you might be wrestling with in your life, in your faith. That story’s a way of saying that faith isn’t straightforward. We’ve sometimes all got to wrestle with God, wrestle with the texts of the Bible, wrestle with our religious traditions. And sometimes we come out limping, but renamed by God, drawn into a new relationship with him, and truly blessed.

Faithful imagination can help us in our journey with God. Perhaps faithful imagination is also like tonight’s anthem’s image of Mary, Star of the Sea – something that can guide us through choppy waters or calm deeps towards our haven which is Christ.

We can use our imagination faithfully by feeding it faithfully. Or, as the Bible verses which gave rise to our College prayer suggest: “Finally, brother and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”<sup>4</sup>

Can you – *imagine - that?*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 105

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *For all that has been, thanks: growing a sense of gratitude*, p.62

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 4:8, cited in a similar context by Bancewicz, op. cit., 113