

“Dimensions of mystery” a sermon based on Isaiah 6:1-8 and Romans 8:12-17 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Trinity Sunday, 31 May 2015 by Kerry Enright.

From Isaiah chapter 6 - “I heard the seraph crying out “holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Wonder is the raw energy of faith.

When I was around 11 I would stand on the concrete slab at the back of our house, in the evening after the sun had gone down, no street lights to interfere, no noise to disturb, and look into space. Star after star, and sometimes a bright shining moon. It was the most wondrous thing - in a time before tv and computers. And, in my childish way, I imagined floating into space, without gravity. Floating past one star after another, on and on and on ... infinity ... beyond my comprehension ... a moment of wonder.

Since there have been other distinct moments when I have been overwhelmed by immensity.

Looking across to Half Dome in Yosemite National Park – beautifully formed – marvellously rounded - and then looking down thousands of metres to the valley below, tiny humans like ants.

On Fridays at Long Beach or Allans Beach sensing again how fragile our existence is, the greatness of the ocean, the fragility of the earth, the incessant pounding and wearing of the waves – it is a gift of living in this part of our world.

The Kimberley is one of its most beautiful parts of Australia. Driving from Broome in the west to Kununurra in the north, for many days, across corrugated red dust roads, canyons and rocks, snakes and crocodiles. The immensity of it. Three times the size of England. We drove through a grass fire that had been burning for three weeks, and was steadily working its way across the country – it would burn for many months. Not just the immensity .. the age. The rocks that surface in the Kimberley are among the oldest surface rocks in the world, over 2 billion years old. And around those rocks the landscape has been evolving for 250 million years. And among the world’s oldest civilisations, Aboriginal people have been living there for at least 55 thousand years.

The great Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff begins his summary of the Christian faith, *Christianity in a nutshell* with a chapter called – All is Mystery.

“Wherever we direct our gaze, to the large and to the small, outward and inward, upward or downward, on all sides we find Mystery. Albert Einstein was right when he said: “The man who does not have eyes open to Mystery will go through life seeing nothing.” Mystery is not the unknown. It is that which fascinates us and draws us to know it more and more. And at the same time it arouses in us wonder and reverence.”

“Holy, Holy, Holy ...”

In the beginning was the Mystery. The Mystery was God. God was the Mystery.

The Mystery is an abyss of love and goodness. The Mystery is a swirl of justice and grace. The Mystery is a dance of life and energy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – “The lack of mystery in our modern life means decay and impoverishment for us. A human life is of worth to the extent that it keeps its respect for mystery.”

I was drawn to the Presbyterian Church because I found a congregation with a sense of wonder, week by week having my horizons extended, my understanding deepened and my identity clarified. It was a congregation where faith was more than human. Faith beyond human dimensions.

In worship God invites us beyond ourselves, beyond our worlds, into wholeness and mystery, into community. In worship God disturbs us, confronts us, questions us, to keep going beyond ourselves. In worship, God does not leave us where we are.

“The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called and the house filled with smoke.”

Reverence, wonder, awe: the raw energy of faith.

Einstein was comfortable with God as ultimate mystery but refused to believe God was personal.

Unlike Einstein, sometimes we are drawn to Mystery by intimacy, by humanness, by proximity, by persons – the baby in our arms, the delicate flower in the garden, the experience of love.

John de Gruchy is a distinguished South African Reformed theologian. He and Isobel had a son Steve. Steve de Gruchy became a renowned theologian in his own right, looking especially at the interface between human development and theology. He was tragically killed white water rafting at the age of 48, five years ago.

In trying to make sense of Steve’s death, John wrote a book “Led into Mystery”.

“I cannot describe the desolation I felt or recall the inarticulate words I uttered, but I know that I was overwhelmed by the mysterious beyond ... I had come upon something inherently wholly other ... and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb.”

Chill and numb, mystery, yes.

And what also comes through is the warm human contact which enabled John and Isobel to attend to Steve’s death and their continuing life: thoughtful compassionate letters from

people, contact from a friend whose own son had died tragically, and the community of people among which they lived.

Then one of the seraphs who had cried out “holy, holy, holy ...” flew to me, and touched my lips.

Not just immensity. There is also intimacy, closeness, as close as the touch of our lips.

Mystery is always disclosing itself, communicating itself, sharing itself; God from God, light from light, true God from true God, says the Nicene Creed. Going out, coming to us, touching our lips.

A God who is Abba, father ... close at hand; God who becomes human in love.

So there is immensity and there is intimacy; and there is also communion.

This Mystery draws us in, in communion.

Tom Long tells the story of Olivier Messiaen.

“On a cold January night in 1941, in an unheated barracks at Stalag 8, a German death camp, some of the most beautiful music ever composed was played for the first time. It was played on old, worn instruments by prisoners at the camp; and it had been composed by another prisoner, a Frenchman and devout Christian by the name of Olivier Messiaen. He said he wanted to compose some music that would proclaim, even in the terrors of the death camp, that the love and hope of God were still alive. He was tired of the beat of the Nazi jack boot: hup-two-three-four.... And so he composed his music according to a beautiful verse in the French translation of the Book of Revelation, where an angel announces, "There is no more time," that is to say, at the end of time all broken, jagged, and seemingly hopeless human history will be gathered into the eternal and loving life of God.

“He called it "The Quartet for the End of Time." How do you compose music like that, music without time? The meters, the rhythms are irregular, constantly changing, which means that the musicians cannot play in splendid isolation, simply counting out their parts in time. Instead, they have to pay attention to each other, to attend to each other. They have to play as an ensemble. More than that, they have to play in communion with each other. In fact, right on the score where most composers would have written, "Play slowly, play moderately, play rapidly," Messiaen wrote, "Play tenderly, play with ecstasy, play with love."

“To belong to God is to belong to the life of God, to the community of one God in three persons, and to be called to live our whole lives in the same manner that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other--playing tenderly, playing with ecstasy, and playing with love. God loved the world so much that God gave God’s only Son, and this Son, Jesus Christ, opens his arms wide to welcome us into the very life of God.”

Immensity, Intimacy, Community - dimensions of the Mystery who is God.