

Questions For Discussion:

- Do you have any sympathy for thinking about Saul as someone trying to follow God before his conversion?
- Share something of your own experience of “conversion” – or is this an uncomfortable word if you grew up in church?
- Share something of a time when God’s love felt personal to you.
- What feelings does the phrase “Died he for me, who caused his pain” summon in you?

The way that Paul talks about his conversion in his letters often reminds people that he was not just ambivalent to Christ, but actively working against the early church. If God’s love could reach him and be for him personally, then surely it could reach to anyone. For both Paul and the Wesley brothers, their recognition of God’s love for them as individuals became a driving force for them to tell other people about it and draw others into the same understanding of God.

For further discussion:

- What do we think those with no faith might think it means to follow Jesus? Are they more likely to think it is about following the rules of a distant master (Wesley’s “faith of a servant”) or about responding to the love of a perfect parent? (what Wesley calls “faith of a son”)?
- How might this impact our mission?
- What do we expect conversion to look like for those who don’t come to church?

Prayer

The words of the baptismal prayer in the Methodist Worship Book emphasise the love that God has for each one of us; that he died and rose for each one of us. We can use that prayer to pray for one another.

Name

for you Jesus Christ came into the world;
for you he lived and showed God’s love;
for you he suffered death on the Cross;
for you he triumphed over death,
rising to newness of life;
for you he prays at God’s right hand:
all this for you,
before you could know anything of it.
Through our relationship with Christ
the word of Scripture is fulfilled:
‘We love because God first loved us.’

Loving God,

We thank you that through Christ we see the depth of your love for us, and that this is true for each one of us, with all of our gifts and talents, our strengths and our weaknesses.

Renew in us a sense of wonder at your love for us.
Empower and enable us to share the message of your love for the people we meet in our daily lives.
Through Christ our Lord and Saviour,
Amen

Week 2

The Lenten Liturgy



Symbol: A warning sign

It was often the custom to post on the crosses of those being crucified a notice of their crimes to act as a warning to others. The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus' notice said simply, 'This is the King of the Jews' a goad to the Jewish leaders and an example of Roman oppression – 'this is what is done to those who oppose us'

Lord, we know that in our world many people are 'labelled' because of where they live, their nationality, their faith. Yet you treat everyone as an individual, you look past the prejudices that divide us.

This morning, our pieces of rubbish symbolise for us our willingness to label others just because they are 'different'

Lord, as we lay these symbols at your cross, forgive us that we too easily label people because in some way it eases our fear of the one who is different. Help us to see the individual and to work with others to banish prejudice, hate and oppression.

We sing, or listen to verse 2 of the hymn:

'Tis mystery all: the immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
to sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
let angel minds enquire no more.

Celebrating the Mystery of God in Christ

By Raj Bharat Patta

Today we consider the second verse of the hymn.

Paul when writing to the Corinthian Church explains about the wisdom of God and says, “But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden...” (I Cor 2:7). This is how the NRSV has translated this verse. Catherine Keller in her book, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divine Process*, was at pains with this translation, for the NRSV has totally left out the word *en mysterio* (in mystery) in translation from the original Greek version. In my quest, attempting to know about it, I also have looked other versions of the Bible for the translations of this verse. The NIV translation of this verse is as follows: “No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden...” This version has added ‘mystery’ but left out ‘in’ into that statement of Paul. What I understand, which Catherine Keller agrees is that Paul is saying here in I Cor 2:7, “we speak God’s wisdom (*Sophia*) in mystery,” allowing us to know that God’s wisdom comes in mystery, dispelling all our presumptions of God, digressing all our dogmas, and discounting all our absolute claims of God, for God’s wisdom comes in mystery.

Many years later, in response to encountering and experiencing the grace of Christ in his life, Charles Wesley while penning this hymn ‘And can it be’ in verse 2 engages in the mystery of God, echoing what Paul has written in I Cor 2:7, “we speak God’s wisdom in mystery.” In a way Wesley was saying, “we sing God’s wisdom in mystery.” This hymn is an exploration of the wisdom of God and the theology of God that can be spoken or sung only in the spirit of mystery. Alluding to Keller who explains, “often what is called “mystery” (“Don’t ask questions, it is a holy mystery”) is mere mystification, used to camouflage the power drives of those who don’t want to be questioned,”¹ it is important to acknowledge that the ‘mystery’ that Wesley mentions in this hymn is not a kind of ‘mystery’ driven by power or authority. Rather it is ‘mystery’ based on his experience expressing that the love of Christ for him is inexpressible, unspeakable and incomprehensible, allowing the love of Christ on the cross as a mystery to celebrate and sing aloud.

In this verse we recognise the wonder of the mystery where Wesley articulates a theological oxymoron ‘immortal dies’ about the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Oxymoron is a combination of words that have opposite or very different meanings in it. Immortality and death are antonyms to each other, and nowhere else in poetry or in real life immortality and death can co-exist, except in the life and death of Jesus Christ. He is expressing the wonder of mystery by asking ‘who can explore God’s strange design?’ upholding the design of God as a mystery. God’s strange designs include celebrating the oxymorons like ‘immortal dies’ which is again a way to recognise the finitude of human strengths and celebrating the infinite gracious spirit of God, the mystery of God in Jesus Christ.

¹ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). P. xi

Such a mystery of 'immortal dying' explains the depth of love divine, which remains a mystery not just to human beings but even for the angels and for the firstborn seraphs. Any effort made by them will be in vain to crack open or untangle the mystery of God, where mystery is part of the nature, identity and design of the divine. The reason Wesley brings in angels into this verse is to explain that even for heavenly beings or non-humans or super-humans the mystery of 'Immortal God's death' is beyond their strength to understand, which is only to explain how deep and mysterious is the love of the divine towards the entire creation.

Christ the origin of life, the Sophia of God, the immortal, dying on the cross is all about God's mercy towards the creation of God, is to say that God loves God's creation even to the point of death. So, in encountering such a mystery of God, what then should be our response? Wesley says all the earth should do is to only adore, and sing adorations to the mystery of Christ's love for creation. It is interesting to note that Wesley brings in an ecological perspective, bringing in the earth to respond to the mystery of God, calling the earth and all those in it to adore, which includes the flora, the fauna and the humanity. Adoration is one of the responses to the mystery of God. Wesley also calls on the angel minds to inquire no more, but only to adore. This call is an invitation to all those who sing this song to adore the divine mystery and not to be confined to any particular theory making absolute claims about it.

The relevance of this verse for our Lenten journey is primarily about celebrating the mystery of God in Christ, for God's love is beyond any confines and is open to all, and all means all. Secondly, in Christ even the opposites can co-exist, like the 'immortal dies.' So, the call for all those following Jesus Christ is to celebrate the diversity of perspectives, holding each other in love. As a church, this verse of Wesley calls us to be an open space, an open table, a hospitable place, holding together the 'contradictory convictions' in graciousness and in love, for only in Christ we find unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Thirdly we are called to interrogate what does it mean to 'adore' the mystery of God for our times today? Mark Olivero in explaining a theology of presence brings in Pope Benedict's speech on adoration as "mouth to mouth" with God. Such a notion he says has come from the Latin etymology of the word 'adore,' which is *ad* as towards and *oratio* as mouth – bringing in the need for God's word on our lips.² Adoration to the mystery of God in Christ on the Cross is about 'mouth to mouth with God's mystery' which is about being the mouth of God, speaking the wisdom of God in mystery and also about speaking God's justice into our contexts today. Finally, in the light of the mystery of the divine love of God on the Cross, we as human beings are called to acknowledge our finitude and limitations, and to recognise and depend on the infinite love of God, the wisdom of God, the mystery of God.

Questions For Discussion:

- 'Immortal dies' – what do you infer from this oxymoron? Why do you think the immortal might die on the Cross?

² <https://politicaltheology.com/a-political-theology-of-presence/>

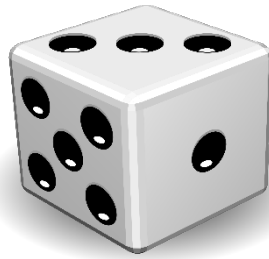
- Can you think of any other theological oxymorons? What are the ways that Christ creates the possibility of hospitality and welcome in the face of the contradictory convictions of our times today?
- For Wesley, his response to the mystery of God is adoration; what are some of the ways in which you might respond to the mystery of God in Christ today?

Prayer

God, the Sophia, the Immortal, the Mystery,
Help us to celebrate your being and becoming like us in Jesus Christ,
Fill our hearts and mouths with your adoration,
Speaking your justice and acting your vision
In transforming our earth today to be a better place for all.
In the name of Christ, our wisdom and our power, we pray. Amen.

Week 3

The Lenten Liturgy



Symbol: A dice

We remember that as Jesus hung, suffering on the cross, the soldiers 'diced' for his clothes. A game of chance willed away the last vestiges of his dignity. A turn of the dice decided who was the richer that day. Yet Jesus offered the message that all are equal in God's sight. God does not play games with his love.

Lord, we recognise that all people and nations are equal in your sight. Your love freely given is not a game of chance dependent on our deserving, our status or where we are born.

As we lay our pieces of rubbish at the foot of the cross may they be symbols of the inequality between people and nations; the dice that determine the quality of life that we are born to.

Lord, as we lay these symbols at your cross, forgive us for all the ways we uphold the inequalities of the world so that we live in comfort whilst others have no life at all.

We sing, or listen to verse 3 of the hymn

He left his father's throne above –
so free, so infinite his grace –
emptied himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
for, O my God, it found out me!

Let me go there: The Incarnation

By Cathy Bird

Today we consider the third verse of the hymn.

In reflecting upon this verse, I am immediately put in mind of RS Thomas' wonderful poem 'The Coming'

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.
On a bare hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

R.S. Thomas

"Let me go there he said"

"He left his Father's throne above."

These are explicit statements about incarnation – about God living willingly **as** a human being, **among** human beings.

For many centuries, the early church argued about what it meant that God should come to earth to live, apparently, as a human being. The early Christian community struggled to express what Jesus had come to mean to them. They knew his words and his actions had the power to transform lives, they knew that although he had been violently killed, he was still very much alive in their hearts and minds, inspiring them to want to share the essence of his message with the whole world. They instinctively sensed that in Jesus they had glimpsed the very nature of the God of love and justice they had been worshipping all their lives. But was Jesus fully God? If so, how could he also be fully human? Was he God just trying to *give the*

impression of being a human? Or was he a human who just happened to have a really special connection with God? Such questions were, for a long time, the cause of persecution and subject to claims of heresy. Eventually in the year 451 a position was arrived at in which Jesus was deemed to be both fully human and fully divine. It's a position that we more or less hold onto today and it is expressed within the Nicene Creed that remains a lynch pin of traditional liturgy. *[If you want to read more about this, and about how it might impact our lives as Christians today, get hold of a copy of Robert Van de Weyer's book The Call the Heresy.]*

But what might it say to us today, this idea that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine? This third verse – the centre of the hymn – seems to offer a summary of everything about Jesus we know and have come to believe. As an act of compassion (“**so free, so infinite his grace**”) Jesus chose came to live among humanity, as a human being (“**he left his Father's throne above.**”) He lived a life to show humankind what God's intention is for humankind (**he “emptied himself of all but love”**), he was killed as a direct result of that life and ministry (“**he bled for Adam's helpless race**”) and his life, teachings and ministry continue today in the lives of his followers (**'tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God it found out me.**) In this verse is all we need to know! In order to fully appreciate the divinity and humanity of Jesus we need to take the whole story on board.

Yet our lives as Christians can very easily focus just on the birth and death and resurrection of Christ. We move from Christmas to Easter so quickly, and even when we are in Holy Week, we talk about the death of Jesus forgetting that it only came about as a consequence of a life lived in a particular way. Incarnation is not just for Christmas! Crucifixion is not just for Good Friday! Resurrection is not just for Easter Sunday! Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection all come together in the pivotal line of the verse in which we sing that God **'emptied himself of all but love.'**

For the human Jesus, we can understand this emptying as God ridding Godself of all the trappings of divinity – the throne, the crown, the omnipotence, the cherubim and seraphim waiting upon God. This human Jesus embodies pure, unadulterated love. At the same time, Jesus as a manifestation of that which is Divine, shows us that God is pure love. God is love. Love is God. Nothing more, nothing less.

And it is this absolute purity of love - this transformative, compassionate, challenging, angry, not to be diverted, justice seeking love – which plays out in the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus and which ultimately leads to his death. This is a love which seeks to bring the mighty down from their thrones, a love which understands that 'levelling up' can only happen if the rich and powerful also empty themselves, a love which crosses divides and accepts humanity in all its glorious diversity and imperfection.

It is also a love which continuously chips away at the self-centredness and greed which undermines and veils God's blessing and against which some, whose hearts have become so hardened fight back in a desperate attempt to protect their own position and status quo. Make no mistake, Jesus bled and died because he took the side of the helpless – the poor, the marginalised – and demonstrated God's bias for the poor. Jesus' death happened because he led a life of pure love and it was just too challenging for some people. Jesus' death was a sign

