

Gazing at God

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As a child I use to lie on my back on the warm summer grass and gaze up in the night sky and try to imagine what infinity was like.

I tried to imagine how space could go on forever and ever and have no boundary or edge and I would try to use my mind's eye to take me there.

My mind would whirr and my spirit would soar. It was just inconceivable.

I would then come a little closer to home and gaze at the Milky Way - millions upon millions of stars twinkling and shining, looking down upon me from a great height.

I had been told about the speed of light and the fact that the light I was seeing was not the star as it actually was at the moment I was looking up into the sky. Indeed the star as it appeared to me was a reflection that may have begun its journey thousands of years ago. That star might not even exist in my time!

This too was mind boggling...these vast distances of space...

As a child I lay on my back on the warm summer grass and gazed up to the heavens and I was moved by the greatness and the wonder of it all.

These, I think, were my first inklings of the Divine – the *via positiva* – being moved by awe and beauty.

Later when I read the stories of Abram despairing at the lack of an heir and looking up hopefully into the night sky and perceiving the voice of God saying '...count the stars if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be', I could fully empathise with him.

And I use the phrase 'perceiving the voice of God' purposefully. Although the story portrays an actual dialogue, I am certain this is not so. It is rather a 'vision' or more accurately a 'waking dream.'

Abram was in a place of emotional turmoil. He and his wife Sarah were well past child bearing age. He had sired a child, Ishmael, though a servant but this was not a true 'heir' in his ancient nomadic eyes.

For him his line was ended...

...and then he gazes into the sky and perceives the voice of God, and this fills him with hope.

He then performs a ritual to seal this moment. It was common in the ancient world for agreements to be sealed by cutting an animal or an object in half and walking between them.

In a dream Abram sees a flaming torch pass between the cut animals – fire of course being a symbol of the Divine – you will remember the burning bush and God appearing as fire on the mountain top in the Sinai desert – these are metaphors.

The deal is done. A covenant has been entered into, and of course later Isaac arrives and Abraham's heritage is secure.

A fantastic story of hope and trust – and it is just a story – a myth that describes the advent of a people of God and of a relationship between human and divine.

Pause

I read as a Contemporary reading the newspaper story of an advertising campaign by a group of atheists who wanted to put a slogan on Auckland buses which read 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.'

I thought this was a great little story and expresses yet again how small and narrow minded religious bigotry can be.

The organisers simply wanted to generate debate. I quote: 'It needs to be out there in public. We need to get people in the street to stop and look and think about what they believe, and why they believe these things.'

The same rationale was of course behind the now infamous 'Mary and Joseph' billboard outside St Matthews in the city at Christmastime.

We inherit and absorb so many ideas and understandings about God and Jesus from all sorts of sources – music, traditions, liturgies – we would be hard pressed to say what we did actually believe and why we believed these things.

Christmas is a very good case in point. The Three Wise Men did not appear to Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem – they came several years later when Jesus was an infant in Nazareth, and Santa Claus is an invention of the Coca Cola Corporation...

We do need to explore what lies behind our beliefs and why in fact we do believe such things if our faith is to have any relevance or purpose.

Behind the Atheist campaign is the understanding that people who believe in God are fearful of him (and it probably is a 'him') and so do not enjoy their lives as they should.

When I gaze into the heavens, or examine a flower, or hear the cry of a new born child, I am convinced there is a God and the name of that God is Love and Hope and Forgiveness and Wonder and Joy...

These are what our stories are all about...

This God does not cramp my life; this God enhances and expands and challenges me to LIVE my life.

The story of the living Christ is surely one of love and hope. The Easter story is just that – even in despair and death there is hope of resurrection and life. Abram discovered this as he gazed into the heavens and became the ancestor of multitude of people.

I think I would want to change the wording for this advertising slogan and say, 'There probably IS a God – but not the one you have been told about. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.'

We are on a journey – a Lenten journey. In this journey we will hear stories of an ancient people as they struggled to make sense of their world and the circumstances in which they found themselves.

We will hear stories of the man Jesus as he journeyed towards the city of Jerusalem and the betrayal and death that was to be his lot.

And we will hear the ultimate story the story of resurrection hope...

As we take this journey let us do it in such a way that we 'connect our spirit without disconnecting our minds'