

What does God want?

Psalm 50:1-8, 23; Luke 12:32-40

Are you the kind of person who, when going out for a meal, can scan the menu and order what you want easily and quickly? Or are you the kind of person who goes through the courses, wondering what might go with what, whether a favourite or least favourite ingredient might be lurking, and go backwards and forwards before eventually wringing out a decision? It is not always easy to know what we want.

For people of faith, one of the recurring challenging questions is, 'What does God want?' From us; from the Church; from the world; and from individual women and men? The answer keeps changing. Do we, as Christians, keep asking and striving to respond as best we can?

I suspect part of the problem is we blithely go about our faith lives without giving God much of a thought. I wonder if that embarrassment and uncertainty about God is why churches across the world, and here in Edinburgh, struggle because the faith part of what should be core to them is sometimes neglected. Lots of people have lots of ideas about what the church wants and needs, and what the church should be doing, and not doing. But when it comes to God, what does God want? Have you ever stopped to think?

It's an age-old problem. In the time of the book of Psalms, and in other parts of the Bible, it was thought that what God wanted was a lot of sacrifice, mostly animal, and a bit of incense thrown in to make things look holy and a little bit mysterious. Whereas there are so many indications that God might well be wanting something so much more, and so very different.

The prophet Micah says to us, "...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"ⁱ Jesus, in the gospels, quotes the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy and tells us the what God wants is for us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.ⁱⁱ

And somewhere, amongst the justice and kindness and humility and loving and believing, and thinking and loving, somewhere amongst all of that we find, without doubt, what God wants.

What God wants is relationship. Yes, obedience, service, usefulness, compassion, works of charity, doing good, praise and all of those things. But at the heart of what God wants is a relationship with us; as community, as individuals. When that relationship is at the heart of our living, then God is at the heart of us. When that is at the heart of our Church, then God is at the heart of everything we do, our motivation, hope and action.

I've been to Rome twice, and visited the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican twice. Once was with a friend, after hours, and we had the place to ourselves. One of the best ways to see the fresco on the ceiling of the chapel is to lie on the floor and look up. Tradition has it that think that Michelangelo painted it lying on his back on scaffolding (like Charlton Heston did in the film *The Agony and the Ecstasy*), but scholars dispute that. It took him around four years to paint. Michelangelo thought of himself as a sculptor and not a painter and he resisted accepting the commission for some time. But how poorer the world of art, and religion, would be if he had not. In the section entitled "The Creation of Adam," figures representing God and Adam reach for each other with their arms outstretched. Their almost-touching fingers are one of the world's most recognizable and widely replicated images. Some theorists think the scene also contains the unmistakable outline of a human brain, formed by the angels and robes surrounding God. Is it meant to evoke God's bestowal of intelligence on the first human. But what is more important is the reaching, between God and Adam. Lying on the floor of the Sistine Chapel, looking up at the painting over three decades ago, that's the image that struck me then, and has stayed with me ever since.

The second visit, two years ago as part of my official meeting with the Pope, I asked to be taken again to the chapel. This time the place was packed with hundreds of tourists. I was being guided round by a cardinal and two archbishops and we were all in our ecclesiastical finery; they in their scarlet and purple, me in my Moderatorial Pirates of the Caribbean outfit. The crowds of tourists parted respectfully. How I miss those days! We stopped, and once again it was under the Creation of Adam, and I found myself, with the Roman prelates, looking upward, and pointing at the details of the fresco. As I looked

around I noticed the crowd doing the same, pointing to God. It struck me that they too, with Adam, with the prelates, with me, were all reaching out to God, waiting to make the connection. Waiting for the promise of life. Waiting to enter into the relationship of faithful, hopeful, loving trust.

And it is that which God wants. God wants relationship. God wants connection with you, with me, and with the whole world. However lost we might be God does not cease to believe that one day we will find our way back. God's love for humankind is at the heart of what our faith is all about. It is a love that is reaching and stretching and questing and searching. It is a love that seeks to get a hold on us, and as we slip from time to time from God's grasp, so God reaches out again, and again, to get a better hold on us.

That is what God wants. A better hold on us. God does not look first for the worship, the obedience, the works, the demonstration of what God means to us. God looks first for us, and for our thanksgiving. How does Psalm 50 end? "He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honours me; to him who orders his way aright I will show the salvation of God."ⁱⁱⁱ

God wants a relationship with us based on gratitude. God does not want a relationship based on fear, or mechanical praise. And then, having reached out and made that connection, in gratitude we seek to help others, with purses that do not grow old, with treasure in heaven safe from thieves and moths and that never fails.

This is the wonder and joy and responsibility and hope of our faith. This realisation that what God wants is a relationship with each one of us. A warm, flexible, developing, wonderful relationship filled with respect and kindness and generosity and gratitude. What a treasure stored in heaven, and on earth, that would be.

"Ours is a culture of artificially created longings. We are invited to resolve the tension by buying this, or wearing that, or going there. Unhappiness is good for business. It just happens to be bad for people...There is, however, one spiritual discipline which religion once gave us and which we still need. It is the simple act of saying, 'thank you', to God. There are prayers in which we ask God for the things we do not have, but there are others in which we simply thank God for

the things that we do have...Gratitude, the acknowledgement that what we have is a gift, is one of the most profound religious emotions.” The former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote that gratitude, “...is to the mind what serotonin is to the brain.”^{iv}

Gratitude is that act of reaching out to the God Who is already reaching out to us. Happiness is not made by what we own, but by what we share. And part of that happiness has to do with the connections we make and the communications we have in this life, with the people around us, and with the God Who is above us, below us, beneath us and around us too.

What does God want? To make connection; to make relationship; so that we might communicate with each other, and receive the blessing God wishes to impart.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Micah 6:8

ⁱⁱ Mark 12:30

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 50:23

^{iv} Jonathan Sacks, Celebrating Life, p15