

Sunday 27th February – Fairtrade Sunday

Exodus 34:29-end

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36

There's a story of a young girl who is busy at the kitchen table drawing a picture. What are you drawing, asks her mother. I am drawing a picture of God – she says deep in concentration.

But nobody knows what God looks like – says her mother

The little girl looks full into her mother's eyes - Well they will when I have finished.

I wonder how you picture God?

Do you think of God in his splendour and majesty. Awesome, maybe even unapproachable. Set apart from all the ordinary mess of the world. To be worshipped and adored, revered and respected.

Or do you see God as a friend alongside you in your daily life. Always there to help and to guide, to comfort and encourage, to inspire and to challenge.

In our Old Testament reading today we get a flavour of the awesome, unapproachable God. Only Moses was permitted by God's grace to come into his presence, but not to see him face to face. For – as God said to Moses – no one can see the face of God and live.

But even seeing God's back – which is what Moses was permitted to do - just being in the presence of God – even this caused Moses' face to shine in such a way that the people of Israel could not look at him without him wearing a veil. It was as if the veil separated the people from God.

In the New Testament reading Paul explains that now we as Christians each have God's spirit within us there is no need for such separation, no need for a veil. God can now be seen in us in the things we do and say. The separation has gone.

And this really follows on from the gospel reading of the transfiguration. The disciples see Jesus transfigured so that the full glory of God can be glimpsed in him. Heaven and earth meet in Jesus. The awesome and majestic God is seen in a human being. And later in the gospels Jesus promises that we all as believers can be filled with God's spirit, God's presence.

And so the awesome God becomes God alongside us and within us. What we need to do is hold those two pictures in balance – for the amazing truth is that the majestic awesome God is also the God alongside us in our everyday lives. One and the same.

So what has this got to do with what we are thinking about today with our theme of fairtrade fortnight and our part in it?

The balance between the majestic, awesome God and the down here alongside us God runs through all of scripture. In the Old Testament the prophets are continually urging the people to recognise the authority of God. But in addition they tell the people not to worship God just with their sacrifices, but also with the way they live. The prophets talk long and hard about ordinary things that please God - fairness in trade and dealings, concern for the less well off and justice for all. Each one of us is made in God's image and therefore there is something of God in each one of us. How we regard other people is how we regard God.

In his life and ministry Jesus also holds this balance. Yes God is to be worshipped and praised, but that same God is also concerned about how we live. This is clearly shown in what Jesus does and says - he tells, for example, the well know story of the sheep and the goats – in which he says that how we treat the prisoner, the hungry, the homeless is how we treat him.

And the apostle Paul says in Romans – present your bodies (your whole lives) as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God – which is your spiritual worship. Worship is about everything we do. God is concerned about the nuts and bolts of how we live and treat each other.

What we have been thinking about this morning – what we saw and heard in that video clip – is about how we regard and treat our fellow human beings.

The video talked of banana plantations where there was a monopoly ownership, dating back to colonial days I guess. In those days when slavery was the norm the workers rights were simply not considered. What mattered was the product being available at the cheapest price.

The fairtrade movement is about treating producers and others as equal human beings, who deserve a fair price for their product. A price that allows them to live a reasonable life with health care, education, food, shelter and a future. As Christians we could say its about recognising that each of those producers or farmers is made in God's image, and the way we treat them reflects the way we regard God.

We heard on the video that the fairtrade deals that were negotiated gave the producers a fair price for their product – enough income to have a decent standard of living. We heard too about how the additional fairtrade premium can help communities develop and thrive – can really make a difference.

The problem is that – almost inevitably since the farmer is getting a better price – fairtrade products cost more. And supermarkets are all about driving down costs. That's how they attract customers.

In the end it is down to consumers like you and me. We can make a difference by our choices. If we choose to buy fairly traded products supermarkets will stock more. It has happened already since the fairtrade movement started some 30 years ago. And it can continue to grow.

If there is a fairly traded product you would like to buy which isn't stocked, lobby your favourite supermarket to stock it. Once it does, sales will increase and producers and farmers will benefit.

But perhaps one of the most important things we can do is to be wise consumers. If the price of a product seems very low ask yourself the question – why is this price so low? The likely answer is that the price paid to the farmer or producer is rock bottom.

So back to our pictures of God.

If we just see God as a God up there, unconcerned with the world and remote from the world it is all too easy to live our lives without regard to him.

But if we recognise that God is concerned with the here and now so much so that he came to live as one of us and now lives through his spirit in each one of us, then we will look on things differently. We will see God in all people and treat everyone – those we know and those we don't - as we would treat God himself

As Jesus says – just as you do it to the least of these, you do it to me.