

“With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ.” (Ephesians 1:8-9)

God's Purpose Revealed

A number of years ago the world renowned scientist and atheist Richard Dawkins took part in an interview explaining why he didn't believe in God. At the end of the interview the interviewer asked him the big *what if* question, “What if God does exist? What if, at the end of your life, you find yourself face to face with God and you're given the opportunity to ask God any question you like? What question would you want to ask God?” Richard Dawkins replied by saying the question he would most want to ask would be: “Why did you make yourself so hard to find?”

Having just celebrated Christmas, we're reminded that even though God is certainly beyond our knowledge and understanding, God hasn't made himself hard to find. The Gospel according to John assures us that, while there are always people who are unwilling to accept or receive God's self-disclosure, God has nevertheless revealed himself in the life of Jesus.

The fact that God has revealed himself, that the Word of God actually became flesh, was born of the virgin Mary and lived among us in the historical Jesus of Nazareth, that is the heart of Christian faith and spirituality.

Over recent years, a significant number of Christians have voiced concern about modern scientific views relating to the evolution of life and the age of the planet and so on. Behind these concerns is a genuine desire to see that God is honored and that the authority of the Bible is upheld. But having listened closely to such debates for about 15 years now, I've come to the conclusion that science isn't the real issue. I'm happy to sit with the current consensus that the universe may be 13.7 billion years old – in some ways that makes the gospel of Christ even more wonderful. If we really intend to share the gospel with others, including those who might hold the views of Richard Dawkins, the real issue is that God exists and that God has revealed himself in Jesus.

That's good news because God's revelation in Jesus assures us that life has meaning and purpose.

Revelation has the power to reshape our lives.

The British writer Iris Murdoch once described an experience of looking out her window while being in a thoroughly bad mood. She was anxious and resentful and unable to enjoy her surroundings, but suddenly her self-absorption was disturbed by the appearance of a hovering kestrel.

“In a moment,” she wrote, “everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to the thinking of the other matter it seems less important.”

Iris Murdoch called this experience of discovering beauty and goodness outside of herself - “un-selfing”.

This story is a wonderful illustration of why God came among us in Jesus. Jesus is God's kestrel hovering outside the windows of our lives, drawing us out of ourselves.

We all know that humankind's biggest problem is our habit of always putting ourselves before everything else. That's why the world's a mess. We're just so self-centered. The Bible calls it sin. Sin isn't eating chocolate after 10 o'clock at night. Sin is the self-centered way in which humans have taken God's place in the scheme of things. As a result we're unable to be the God reflecting people God intended us to be. Apart from rare moments when we're able to reach beyond ourselves, we are slaves to sin.

In his letter to the Christian community in Ephesus Paul wrote rather exuberantly that because of Jesus we “have redemption through his blood.” Redemption is an ancient word that describes being bought out of slavery. In other words Jesus is able to free us from our slavery to sin.

In the same breath Paul declared that Jesus came in order for us to be adopted as God's children. (Ephesians 1:5)

The opening of John's gospel John says the same thing another way. Here's Eugene Peterson's paraphrase from the Message:

But whoever did want him,
who believed he was who he claimed
and would do what he said,
He made to be their true selves,
their child-of-God selves.
These are the God-begotten,
not blood-begotten,
not flesh-begotten,
not sex-begotten.

Life and purpose aren't found by simply looking at ourselves, or through microscopes, or underneath stones or even at history, as interesting and worthy as those things may be. Meaning can't be found within the system; it's revealed to us from beyond. That's one reason why atheists often say that life has no purpose beyond a person's private hobbies. Like Iris Murdoch, we all need to discover something that reaches beyond ourselves. God is beyond us. Life and purpose are found beyond the windows of our lives through God's self-disclosure in Jesus.

God's Revelation in Jesus Becomes a Way of Life

There was Jewish Philosopher who lived during the first half of the 1900s. His name was Martin Buber, and once, when he was writing about ethics, he pointed out that "Every ethos (that is the attitudes, the values and goals of a community), every ethos has its origin in revelation." He said that was true regardless of whether people were still aware of the original revelation or even obedient to it.

That's true for our society at large. Our laws, our sense of morality, underlying principles such as justice and forgiveness, even our sense of hope that there's a future worth living for, these have their roots in Biblical revelation; they exist because God has spoken. As our society drifts away from God's revelation in Christ that ethos becomes more and more residual, and in need of renewal.

The coming of Jesus created a community with a particular ethos.

We rediscover our ethos by centering our lives in Jesus and allowing his revelation to give new shape to our hopes, the way we work, the way we relate to others, the way we relate to the world.

When the apostle Paul wanted to describe the significance of the Jesus ethos he described it like this. Jesus, Paul said, reveals God's management plan for all creation.

"He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth. It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for." (The Message)

Revelation doesn't result in simply more information. Revelation flows out into a new way of life.

To the Praise of his Glorious Grace

15 years ago Terrence Malick directed an antiwar film called *The Thin Red Line* that explored humankind's self-destruction and its destruction of nature. There's a scene in the film that is relevant to what we're exploring today. In this scene the central character, a young soldier who'd prefer living in peace and harmony among Solomon Island villagers, is walking through a burned out battle field. The bodies of both sides lie wounded and amidst the destruction and bewilderment of it all he asks: "Why can't they see the glory?"

The glory for him was not to be found in the ambitions of self-centered humankind. He discovered the glory permeating the natural world, in the worship rhythms and hymns of the island people. There's a glory beyond us, one that breaks into life, renewing and restoring, giving shape and purpose.

We live in a world broken by human self-centeredness, ravaged by sin; into this world God's glory has stepped down and been revealed. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Like the young man in Malick's film we are people to be shaped by that glory, longing to see God's glory permeate all of life with the harmony and rhythm of God's will.

This is the purpose that weaves itself like a song throughout Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Regardless of how young or old, incompetent or self-centered we feel, God longs to adopt us as his children:

To the praise of his glorious grace.

So that we...might live for the praise of his glory...

To the praise of his glory.

*The Reverend Andrew McDonald,
Church of Mackenzie
2nd Sunday Christmas 2014.*