

## Almighty?

## John 3.10

Jesus says to Nicodemus ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’ I can’t claim to be as distinguished a teacher as Nicodemus, but being a preacher puts me into the teacher category. And from time to time I read something which makes me think - ‘Why on earth hadn’t I seen that before?’ But as with Nicodemus failing to see the obvious with Jesus, that happens to us all from time to time. Let me share one example of what I mean.

Let me take you back to the first words we say together at the beginning of the service. We begin the first prayer ‘Almighty God’. That is quite a common way for prayers to begin. Quite a lot of the collects in the BCP begin like that, there were even more in the ASB, but Common Worship has cut back to some extent – but it still most prevalent way of beginning a prayer.

So what is the problem? Well simply this – the expression Almighty God hardly occurs in the Bible. That was what an article in the magazine *Theology* put in front of me. Come off it, you might say – I can think of lots of places where it does. And you would be both right and wrong. There are indeed many places where the translations we use say ‘Almighty’ but that isn’t what the original language said. So the disturbing fact is that in broad terms scripture does not speak of ‘Almighty God’ – only the translations do. And some translations are more prone to it than others. The Hebrew name of God which is at the heart of all this is El Shaddai – which occurs 48 times, 31 of which are in the book Job – I will come back to that. But whilst the most reliable translations restrict themselves to that sort of number – and the one we use in church actually has a footnote each time to say that ‘Almighty God ‘ is the traditional (as opposed to the accurate) rendering of El Shaddai – the Good News Bible has 289 ‘Almighty Gods’ and the New International Version has 333! Now there is a reason why they have opted for it – but if we are ruthlessly honest it is misleading.

The warning about ‘traditional rendering’ is important, because probably El Shaddai meant original ‘God of the Mountains’, but it came to be a name for God who sustains and maintains his creation. But it was also the name that when God meets with Moses, is to be replaced by the name God reveals to Moses –Yahweh- which means something like ‘I am who I am’.

Now this takes me back to Job. You will remember that the story of Job is of a good man who is allowed to be harassed by Satan, and suffers terribly. And he has four friends who come to comfort him. And both they and Job refer to God as El Shaddai – and he comes over as a capricious, tyrannical and cruel God. Job rails against this awful God who treats him like this as shouts ‘Let the Almighty (El Shaddai) answer me’. And God does. But here is the bit which made me feel so pig-ignorant. In Chapter 38 it says ‘Then God answered Job out of the whirlwind’. But the word for God is not El

Shaddai – Almighty God – it is Yahweh. The point of the story is that they have been talking to the wrong God, as it were. They have seen God as having all power – and have failed to see that the God with whom they want to be in touch is not that sort of God at all – he is not Almighty God, but the God of Moses and Abraham and Isaac. He is personal and merciful and loving, not remote, and tyrannical and unfeeling, as the name Almighty implied. It is such a basic point – and I had never grasped it before.

There are so many things that flow from this. For a start, it reminds me that there is a certain risk in reading the Bible without expert help. God thankfully enables us to learn much from it without any of that – but we do need to check things out – and even the ‘teachers of Israel’ like me can be missing vital pieces of knowledge. It reminds me that we can get caught up into assuming things that are not necessarily true, but we think they are just because people go on saying it. There is an old Latin tag ‘lex orandi est lex credendi’ – what we believe comes from what we pray. So words enshrined in our services get under the skin. It applies to hymns too – I think I may have mentioned before the German hymn book which had a section labelled ‘hymns of dubious theology’ – which included Onward Christian soldiers’ – in other words, a health warning not to take the words more seriously than we should. So thinking of this, I have become uncomfortable that I have encouraged children to sing things like ‘My God is so big, so strong and so mighty there’s nothing that he cannot do.’ At one level, that is OK, but it actually comes out of an El Shaddai view of God, which at the heart of things is *not* true. God cannot do anything, because that would be a contradiction in terms. God cannot make yellow blue, or make a cat that walks on one leg. If he did they would cease to be what they are and become something else.

Getting our ideas of ‘Almighty’ right also change the ways in which we tackle the great and imponderable questions that have always troubled believers – how can God allow things that are terrible and destructive, if he is almighty? And now is not the time to try to grapple with something so huge. But do you see that if we have got an image of God which is of the totally powerfully able-to-do-anything kind, that sort of questions is much more acute. And Job has doing that wrestling – and the answer he gets is that he has been visualising God in the wrong way. And when the God which is not El Shaddai, Almighty, but Yahweh, ‘I am’ answers him, he is able to respond and understand and maintain his faith.

We Christians ought to have grasped this much more readily than we have. What kind of God is revealed by Jesus who is born in a stable and laid in a trough, who is an apprentice carpenter and then a vilified healer and teacher, who is tortured and executed? It isn’t the image of El Shaddai, Almightyness. In fact Jesus doesn’t tell his followers to address their prayers to El Shaddai, Almighty God, or even to Yahweh, the Lord, as Jews usually did. Rather he tells them to say Abba, Father – the word a little boy uses of his Dad.

So is it therefore wrong to say ‘Almighty God’? in our prayers? The answer is ‘No’ as long as we know what we are saying. I haven’t traced for you the story of how we came to get this misleading translation in English, but roughly it is through a Greek version of El Shaddai which is Pantokrator – the word that is translated ‘almighty’ in the creeds. And what the Greek fathers meant by that was of a God constantly sustaining and upholding the universe, rather than tightly controlling it. It is a million miles from the string-pulling God that many non-believers, and sadly many believers have.

There is a face of Christ from a 6<sup>th</sup> century icon which is in the monastery of St Catherine on Mt Sinai. Like all ancient icons, it represents a rather distant monumental figure – a reminder that we are dealing with God, not a mate. But – and it is a huge but – you look at that face, and see that the two halves are radically different. The left hand side, as we look at it, is solemn and maybe even severe. It is strong and powerful. But look at the right hand side. There the cheek is shadowed, the eyebrow is arched, and – sadly you can’t see the colour, the eye is bloodshot, and the moustache droops. Here is a face of God who suffers with us. Here is God who embraces the pain of the world to transform it from within. He is not El Shaddai, who can snap fingers and change everything. But this icon is called Christ Pantokrator. It is Jesus who is man, Jesus who is God showing real power in a totally different way – as the feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson put it ‘power-with’ rather than ‘power-over’.

