

## **Sermon 5 September 2010 - "A personal God"**

**Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT**

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**Jeremiah 18:1-11 Luke 14:25-33**

According to yesterday's Canberra Times, world famous physicist and mathematician, Stephen Hawking, has apparently changed his mind about God. Previously Hawking has remained open to the possibility of a Creator behind the universe, but now he is concluding that all can be explained simply by the laws of physics - in his latest book he writes that there's no need to conceive of a "benevolent creator who made the universe for our benefit" - instead he writes that the universal laws of physics such as the law of gravity are enough to say that the universe "can and will create itself from nothing".

It won't surprise you to know I take a different view. But it will also not surprise you to know I wouldn't want to take on Stephen Hawking in an argument about science! My disagreement with his conclusions would be based on two personal convictions and on my near lifelong experience.

The two convictions which back my belief in God are first, I am convinced there is a life-force which undergirds the existence of the universe and of life, a creative life-force which we call God; and second, I am convinced that this God is a personal God who relates to his creation, who relates to people, who loves, cares for and sustains the life of the universe and of us people. And my near-lifelong experience which backs these convictions is the daily sense that God is with me, constantly available, a life-giving loving, guiding, joy-bringing God whom I know and love personally. So I disagree with Stephen Hawking.

Our passage today from Jeremiah supports my convictions but also raises a significant difficulty in my understanding of the nature of God. In today's reading we learn that God can and will change his mind on the basis of how people are relating to him. This is the personal God, relating with people, wanting people to follow his way of goodness, unselfishness, justice and love, and responding to their response to him. No problem there, that affirms our understanding of God as personal, loving, a life-force involved in people's lives, acting for good.

But there's a difficulty in today's reading from Jeremiah as well. The prophet says that God is about to bring disaster on his people Israel because of their unfaithfulness to God. God is likened to a potter dissatisfied with what he's crafted and ready therefore to destroy it and start again. The difficulty I have here is that I'm not at all sure God really deals with nations like that. The prophecy more or less implies that God treats nations like puppets, that will be controlled, rewarded or punished, according to how God feels about them. Is God really like that?

When you read the gospels and ponder the ministry and teaching of Jesus, the overwhelming sense you gain is that God deals with people individually. There's no collective punishment with God. God wants to relate personally to every individual. Jesus calls people to realise their need of God, to accept God's forgiveness and love, and he teaches us and shows us time after time how God wants us to live - ethical moral compassionate lives in close prayerful relationship with God and in positive caring relationship with each other. Jesus does refer to God as the Lord of heaven and earth, he does see God as Creator of everything, but he rarely speaks of it. His

much more constant emphasis is on God's closeness to each one of us, God being the Father of all and us his children, God wanting us to receive his love and to live with the power and inspiration and joy of his love.

And it's this closeness of relationship which enables God's people to accept the challenge of living the way God wants us to live. As today's gospel reading tells us following Christ may require sacrifices, may mean putting God ahead of our families and friends, may mean the hard work of planning and implementing big schemes, may mean giving something up, like possessions. But if we know God is personally with us, those sacrifices and hardships are not too difficult, for with God there is security, peace and a deep-seated joy in life.

I think Jesus would say to Stephen Hawking think again, friend. We don't need to find answers to all the imponderables about the universe and its origins, we don't need to prove that creation has a creator, we in fact will never know everything. Rather, open yourself to accept God into your life, a personal relating warm-hearted caring God, and then you will not doubt God's existence, as creator, redeemer, sustainer, friend.

Many of you will know quite a deal about John Wesley, the founder of the Christian movement known as Methodism and the one after whom this church is named. He died in 1791 at the age of 87. It's recorded that as he lay dying in London, surrounded by quite a few relatives, friends and colleagues in ministry, twice he roused himself and said to them "The best of all is, God is with us". That simple conviction, that faith, that experience, that God is with us, is the counter-argument we bring to the Stephen Hawkings of our world. And that is the witness we bear to the good news of Jesus Christ - that the best of all is, God is with us.

To the glory of God. Amen.