

Great Mysteries of the Gospel of God

There I was this January at the desk of the Customs officer at Kingsford Smith airport about to get on a flight to the USA. I handed her my declaration form to say I wasn't taking more than \$10,000 out of the country – who would be so lucky! What's your address? Didn't I put that on the form? No. Where are you going? Didn't I put that on the form? No. Then she blurted out: 'Oh my God, a theologian. Oh I'm so sorry'. Please don't be sorry you are absolutely right; it is about God.

She looked at me absolutely straight faced and serious: 'Do you have a word for me?' I thought to myself; struth there is a line behind me; I want to get on a plane; what do I say? I looked directly at her across the high counter and said 'It's big'. I couldn't believe what came out of my mouth. 'It's big'. She looked straight back at me, nodded her head and said, 'It's big is it'. And I looked at her and said, 'It's really big'. She handed my passport and said 'have a nice trip'. I walked away thinking, 'what a wally. I can't believe I said that'. I thought of the jailer in the Acts of the apostle who said to Paul, 'what must I do to be saved?' And he had a good response. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Not me. 'It's big'; for heavens sake.

A day later I am speaking with a colleague at the conference I was attending. I was still coming to terms with my inane response to the customs officer. Next thing I know he's sharing the story with our small group. The next day the whole conference is inducted into the new form of gospel evangelism, It's big and by the end of the conference people are saying it's not big, its bigger; actually it's the biggest. They put it on a big piece of butcher's paper – it was a high tech conference. Ridiculous.

Then I hear this whisper in my head: 'That than which nothing greater can be conceived' St Anselm, 11th century, Archbishop of Canterbury on God. I thought 'Gee that's what I said to that customs officer, didn't I – in a slightly abbreviated Australian of course.

Is God big? How big?

Recently I read Herbert Kelly's *The Gospel of God*, published in 1928. Kelly founded of the Society of the Sacred Mission in 1893. The

society had a common life of prayer and fellowship in a variety of educational, pastoral and community activities in England, Australia, Lesotho and South Africa. Kelly was a tough-minded prophet like character. He had a deep concern for less fortunate and especially those who had not had the opportunity for a good education. He established a place where at the time young men could study theology and prepare for ministry. His book, *The Gospel of God*, was based on his addresses at Swanick in 1927. The book reads like a clarion call for engagement with the world. Kelly, does not mince words. His writing is direct, unsophisticated, gritty and open-ended. Kelly reveled in provocative statements and questions. He was a catalyst for people's thinking. He wanted people to think hard, to probe and develop their ideas. *The Gospel of God* is not an easy read but it is an important work.

I was struck as I engaged with Kelly with the frankness of the fundamental questions that occupied him: 'What does God do? Does God do anything, or is God only another name for ideals? Is God's purpose something which God is doing, is carrying out, or only something which he would very much like us to have, but which he is powerless to effect, and wishes you would do it for him?' The gender language reflects his time.

The older I am the more Kelly's questions press in on me. They are the questions that resist easy answers or simple solutions. Why? Because I reckon they invite us into the great mysteries of life. These questions persist; they invite, even demand our attention. Kelly's questions are buried in the very human questions about the purpose of our life, what it means to be a moral agent, our vision of the good life and a good society. Kelly was always asking whether 'God is big or little'. Frankly this is precisely the question I have been asking more and more the longer I have been on my spiritual journey. 'Is God big or little'? The question is child-like. But I ask it over and over again as an adult.

On the one hand we have to reckon with the infinite identity of the God of an expanding cosmos – the eternal divine being is most assuredly big. God is big; so big that God is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. So big that our language breaks down. We bump up against the immensity of divinity. Our most eloquent language cannot hide from us our lack. The great philosophical

theologian Austin Farrar once said that 'God is on the verge of conceiving and at the heart of knowing'.

On the other hand we have to reckon with the God of the little; the very little; the God of the seed of new life in Jesus born of Mary. The radical particularity of the divine presence – minute, intimate. We have to do with the nearness of God. It is a fundamental insight of Medieval theology and beautifully captured in the words of Thomas Aquinas: 'God is in all things, and intimately'. Julian of Norwich was the great exponent and practitioner of this radical nearness. Julian, in mystic tones spoke of 'the homely God'. And her most radical theology revolved around God as mother pre-eminently revealed in Jesus. She speaks of 'mother Jesus'. She handles this radical theme with delicacy and skill. Why mother? Because 'we have our being in him, where the ground of motherhood begins And so our mother in nature and grace But the work of Jesus is also motherly 'the throes of birth are found in the travail of the cross .. and 'the milk by which the child of God is suckled is the blessed sacrament that is the precious food of life..' In short she speaks of Christ as our brother, saviour and mother. Here is a powerfully intimate up close and personal God.

So we have to do with the radical expanding transcendence of the eternal Spirit and the up close motherly God in Jesus Christ. ; such are the infinite boundaries of the God who evokes worship and awe.

Kelly was right to ask whether God was big or little. In truth the answer is a both/and. In truth the answer is too much for the human mind. The path of humility seems the only way forward. As Kelly said, 'I am a learner' – someone on the education road; an unfinished project. Kelly's God questions lead us into questions of moral responsibility; about how we participate in the life of the eternal in the here and now in our institutions, in our schools. So we are not surprised to discover that for Kelly the key thing is 'to follow God's ways' in the world. Kelly wanted to know God's ways; Kelly wanted to follow God's ways; Kelly wanted to join in God's ways; and perhaps just as importantly Kelly wanted others to join also. This was the human project that helped to make sense of what he and so many before him and after him have called 'the riddle of life'.

How to do it? How to follow the ways of God in the world? Some thousands of years ago the writer of Deuteronomy announced: 'Hear

O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.' Why? Because this was the God who had led the people out of bondage into freedom; out of Egypt. This is the big God, the God of the universe who comes up close and personal in the small things; who cares for a people oppressed, forlorn without help, in need of a savior. The real God is the God who saves. Amidst the many pretender gods of the ancient world, the God of Israel was the true God precisely because this God was more powerful and genuinely tender hearted than the Canaanite cult of Baal.

So what kind of God? Big or little? Both and? Infinite being embracing an expanding universe unimaginable in extensity? This same God of the little things; intimately present to all things; the God of the cracks in our life; like the first light of dawn breaking through the darkness at the edges of the blinds. What kind of God? Kelly's question, Anselm's question, mother Julian's question. The question driving the writer of Deuteronomy.

And perhaps not surprisingly it is the question in the shadows of the disciples' question, 'Why couldn't we cast it out'? And Jesus' answer, 'Your God is too small' – well that's what he meant – 'because of your little faith'. Not much there chaps; actually hardly anything. In fact I'll tell you how constricted and woefully inadequate your God is – 'if you had faith the size of a mustard seed you will say to the mountain, 'move from here to here' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you'. In fact the disciples have no faith; non-existent. If we had even the smallest skerrick of faith in a big God, why, mountains can be moved; nothing is impossible.

So what's the answer to passing on the great tradition of the great mystery of faith; how might we pass on the good news of the great and good God; the God big and little; the God of the universe; the God of the stable, the God of Calvary; the God of the Emmaus Road; the God of great tradition of faith and witness; of men and women, martyrs and saints, the God of the ordinary and forgotten. The God who emerges out of the cracks of brokenness; the God who evokes our praise, awe, joy and humility. The answer from the ancient of days: 'Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise'. It is both simple and yet it requires a degree of spiritual

intensity. This is not wrote learning. Don't be fooled. 'recite it, when I lie down, when I rise, when at home, in conversation'. This is about the cultivation of a habit of life; a practical wisdom. In other words, tell the story of God; let it become the story of your heart, never forget it; listen to this story in the lives of others; and always be ready because you never know when someone, completely out of the blue will look you in the eye and say, 'do you have a word for me'. What will you say?

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