Pentecost 22 **Mark the Evangelist**
9/11/2025

John 1:1-5, 10-14, 16-18

Against the idea of God

ForeWord

Softening the hard thing

In her 2017 book, *Doughnut Economics*, economist Kate Raworth remarks that there is a graph in economic theory which is rarely drawn: the graph that projects growth into the extended future. This graph is hardly seen because everyone knows that we live within a closed system with limited resources, so that the kind of growth politicians (and many of the rest of us) like to see portrayed in graphs can't continue forever. Every economist knows there is a plateau coming, or even a cliff. But no economist – and certainly no politician – knows what to do about it. So, let's not think about it and, just as certainly, not put it in a graph.

But we do know there's an issue here. And so the compromise, Raworth notes – or rather, the wilful self-delusory step – is the invocation of adjectives to qualify growth. We will still work towards growth, but it will be good growth: "sustainable" growth, "equitable" growth, "balanced" growth, "inclusive", "resilient" or "green" growth. None of these addresses the big, hairy problem that has everyone on edge in the first place – growth is growth, and it can't go on forever. But it looks a little less growth-y when we attach the right words to it, and the optics matter enormously in modern politics.

The God of many adjectives

But my interest today isn't so much the problem of growth in economic thinking as the *type* of problem it is. Raworth's observation reminded me of recent developments in churchly God-talk. In a Synod meeting a couple of years ago, I was particularly struck by the way the prayers groaned under the weight of a whole lot of words which, once upon a time, didn't need to be said. The use of adjectives was especially obvious. The word "God" was often apparently felt to be insufficient – "O God…". Rather, it seemed better to say, "O good, gracious, all-powerful, all-merciful, all-suffering, all-loving God". There is a fair bit of adjective-creep in public prayer in some quarters these days. (Listen for it even in my own prayers today!)

And there's a good reason for this tendency, at least superficially. The problem with invisible things – invisible hands or invisible gods – is that they are…invisible. All-embracing ideas are like this. And so, we throw something over them to give at least some outline and sense of what we are dealing with.

The connection between economic language and God-language here is not merely accidental. Economic language is the determining language of our common life in late Western capitalism. As God once was, economics is now at the heart of how we understand and order ourselves and our world. The economy stands as god, economists as theologians, politicians as priests, GDP is the measure of righteousness, and mortgage holders, self-funded retirees and national debt take turns as the political priests' sacrificial offerings to the economy. Were theology to return to Melbourne's secular universities, it would be most usefully located in the economics department. (That is a serious proposal: the God problem is not a "religious" problem but a deeply human one, corresponding to life together in our oik-onomy).

The growth economy and God are equally broad and encompassing things which are, for us, *ideas* somehow at the heart of the matter – necessary ideas, but also impossible, elusive, not-quite-unutterable.

And so we dress our ideas – colour them, qualify them – to make them seem less the problem they are. We stitch together a few adjectival fig leaves for both the invisible God and the simultaneously impossible but necessary growth economy. We do this because perhaps there really is nothing in our deepest ideas and, if they are left naked, we might see deeply disturbing things which cannot be unseen.

Naming the issue

All ideas – as *ideas* – suffer from this problem. They are not so much too big to fail as too big to be right. So far as the idea of God goes, the simplest solution is to dispense with the idea of "a" god and replace it with a *name*. The primary names the church has are the Old Testament's "Yahweh" (Exodus 3 and *passim*, which appears in English translations as "the LORD" in small capitals), and the New Testament's "Father", which Jesus uses for the one who sent him. Both of these are indispensable, but not without problems.

The thing about names, and what distinguishes names from ideas, is that they are specific. A name denotes a shape – the shape which is given by a story. A name has content in a way that an idea does not. "Donald Bradman", "Donald Trump" and "Donald Duck" are not three takes on the idea of Donald, but three unique identities, histories, and consequences. The name indicates what is at play – what is given shape and content by the story the name refers invokes.

But the name I'm interested in today is not "Yahweh" or "Father" with their particular possibilities and problems. Rather, I'm interested in the name Jesus – the particular Jesus-of-Nazareth Jesus who features in the Gospel stories and church confession. Whatever we believe personally about this name, its work in the biblical narrative is to be the concrete, specific place where the idea of God becomes unique, storied.

The first eighteen verses of John's Gospel are an introductory statement of what readers will encounter in the text. For all the details of the story, central is the extension of the idea of God to what Jesus says and does, and is said and done to him. Let's pause for a moment to hear part of that introduction to John's Gospel, listening particularly for the last verse: "makes him known".

<u>Word: The Testimony of Scripture</u>

(→ Hearing: John 1.1-5, 10-14, 16-18)

<u>Word: Proclamation</u>

Exegeting God

"No one has ever seen God". This is the "beyond", the impossible, the unseen unthinkable we indicate with the label "God". Within Jewish and even most pagan thinking, God had never been an idea. But modern minds think in secularised Greek mode, and our heads are full of ideas.

And so this is how we're likely to hear, "No one has ever seen God" – as referring to the intangibility and ungraspability of God.. But, John says, the Word, the Only-Begotten, this one has "made [God] known", or literally in the Greek, "exegeted" God. To exegete something is not to explain it but to unpack it —literally to "lead out" of it. Jesus, as it were, is the leading out of God into what feels like the non-God space, perhaps as one might pull a thread. Each story, each conflict, each word and teaching is

such a thread. The hidden God not exposed but here and there implied; the distant God brought near; the shapeless God formed.

Jesus himself is this exegesis, this leading-out. Who has seen me, Jesus says elsewhere in John, has seen the Father (John 14.9). And so, strangely, there is no need for any adjectives to attach to "God" but Jesus himself. The god we are concerned with is not "the merciful" or "the loving" or "the Creator" god, but the Jesus-god. This is what our trinitarian confession grasps after – what God must be like if the crucified Jesus is God's only worthy adjective.

Faith thinks about God – and, for that matter, about the economy – in this way. To say, as the church does, that Jesus is "the Christ" or "God" is to attach to those all-embracing ideas the details of one life lived. So also for the economy. If Jesus is God, Jesus is the Economy in the same way. And if this is starting to sound quite nonsensical, that's just the point. Kate Raworth's argument about economic growth is precisely that it's a wilful and nonsensical reduction of the economy, and yet we are committed to it, perhaps even to the destruction of the world we inhabit. From the perspective of Christian faith, to say that Jesus is God, or the Economy, is to say that neither God nor Economy mean what we think or hope they mean.

Christian faith commits, rather, to something more concrete, specific – to something more *human*. Christian faith proposes the life of Jesus, not so much for "salvation" (another vague idea) as to affirm that a human life can indeed be the presence of God, even in a world like this. God, and the economy, can be that small and still be what they fully are.

One of the extraordinary things about John's presentation of Jesus is the intimacy of the relationship he has with God. Jesus "exegetes" God not by providing information. God is "drawn out", is present, in Jesus in the way that a friend's spouse is present in that friend even when the spouse is not in the room, or a parent is present in a child even when the child is by himself, or (negatively), the way a traumatic upbringing is present even at the end of a long life.

This kind of intimacy is the gift of the gospel, an intimacy which changes our sense of what we are and so what matters in the life we've been given.

Christian faith has no "idea" about God. Rather, the believer finds herself exegeted, drawn into a new experience of life, a new assessment of what is happening around her, a new sense of how to be, and of what to do.

God meets us in the nitty-gritty of lives, not in our grand visions and plans, our wishful thinking or dismissal of inconvenient details. The Jesus-God is the Jesus-Human. And the invitation of this God is an invitation to be exegeted, drawn out of what we are into what God has created us to be: not a small part of a grand project, but a grand project, despite our smallness.

Jesus makes God known, that we might know ourselves anew.

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