

144 People's biggest problem is God

In a different context – my struggle, of late, to “understand” (ha!) prayer – I found this quote that hit me between the eyes:

“After more than 25 years in pastoral ministry, 20 of them teaching on prayer, I have come to the conclusion that most people’s biggest problem with prayer is God. They envisage him scowling, perpetually disapproving, invariably disappointed and needing to be placated or persuaded in prayer.” (Pete Grieg, *How to Pray*, p53)

OK, that’s overstated (and I thought I was the master of overstatement!), but maybe this is a bit of what’s behind what I said last time, how I fell in love with God as a student at 18 but then the love ebbed away; then I refound that love at age 35...

I remember going into the bank on Unthank Road in Norwich, and the lady behind the counter saying, “You’re looking happy today!” and I spontaneously replied, “Yes, I’ve just realised that God really loves me!” But then I realised what I was saying and added, “Oh, oh, ... and he loves you too!”

... and then I refound that love again at age 68. And this time, I ain’t gonna lose it!

Tell me, how many sermons do you remember? Early days at my new church (which follows the church’s lectionary, so the passages for each week are set), the preacher said, “We’ve got the parable of the sower **again!** Look, are you willing to pray with me that God will teach us something new today?” And we prayed... I prayed.

What a rubbish farmer, she admitted. He just chucked the seed willy-nilly all over the place. What a waste of seed! What’s the point of slinging seed on the path or among the weeds? But that’s what God is like. If there is **any** chance of that seed germinating... God is just desperate for us to receive the seed of his love.

And the other image of God that I have kept returning to these past four years is the prodigal father. No, that’s not a typo. To me that parable is about the prodigal (totally unreasonable, wasteful) nature of God’s love – way over the top!

I admit that the elder brother was a bit moody, and not very forgiving, but let’s face it, he had a very good point. How totally unfair! This total waste of space had taken half the estate, spent it **all**, come back, just said, “Oops, sorry!” and his father had given him the robe and the ring – which were his by right – and to top it all, he threw a party! That’s really, really unfair!

Sorry, no! **That’s what God’s love is like** – totally unreasonable! Don’t expect to understand it (well, do have a go – it’s worth the effort, and I have tried these past four years) but just accept that God is totally and utterly besotted with you, and will do whatever it takes to restore you. You’ll get the cloak and the ring and the party. That’s what God is like! And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise because we have Jesus’ word for it!

Ha! Maybe I was wrong, maybe Jesus is the master of overstatement...