

**Sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts
on lived experience of God as part of 'Passionate Spirituality'**

Mothing Sunday, 15th Mar. 2015

This is the final sermon in a series of four exploring the results from our survey into the 8 characteristics of a healthy church. The first sermon provided an overview, and looked at our *strengths*: of using people's gifts and our worship. Whilst the next two explored two contributory elements in our *lowest* score for 'passionate spirituality' – those being prayer and Bible reading. I'm grateful to everyone who's responded either through the cards returned, or by letter and email. As people will be aware, we're planning a church lunch in April to take forward those responses and they'll feed into that event.

So this sermon will examine one, last component of passionate spirituality – our lived experience of God. In the survey this included our responses to statements such as: 'I often tell other Christians when I have experienced something from God' and our *lowest* score of all (and I'm genuinely surprised at this) 'I firmly believe that God will work even more powerfully in our church in coming years'. And that's all the more surprising when the highest response across the profile for spirituality was the response to the question: 'I am enthusiastic about our church'. Nevertheless, those two combined, low-scoring questions were our lowest in the survey so what can we learn from them?

In order to explore some of the dynamics here, let me to you back many years to when I was at secondary school. I lost my watch which my parents had given me as a Christmas present and was very upset. I prayed to God and early the next morning I went out and searched near the bus stop where I'd alighted from the school bus and there hidden in the grass was my watch. At the time I attributed that as God's response to my prayer so it could be categorised as something I experience from God.

As I've continued my faith journey – experiencing, exploring and reflecting upon God's action in the world – I no longer see God working in such a straight forward manner. I know that some people do, so this isn't meant as a criticism of their theology or a negation of their experience. But for me, to see God directly prompting me to find my watch or, say, providing a parking slot or dealing with the other comparatively *minor* challenges of life raises more questions than it solves. What about those prayers that aren't answered? What about those people facing life-threatening challenges? What about the big issues of war, disease and natural disaster. I do believe that God is engaged in the world but Divine involvement is much more nuanced than a chess master moving pieces or a parent in conversation with a child.

So what does that mean for us as a church? Well, let's stay with my story of the lost watch. I've been ordained for 30 years and I'm not aware of having used that story in a sermon before – an encounter that's helped shape my *own* understanding of God. But this is no longer *personal* – rather it's about clergy *personality* types and their impact upon churches. A lay friend who's spent much of his childhood and early adult life in various evangelical churches until he started singing in a Church of England choir and for the last 30 years has been involved in more formal liturgy once observed that *some* clergy regard sermons as an excuse to stand up and talk about themselves for 25 minutes.

That remark has stayed with me so when I preach I try not to use the first person personal pronoun – having just used it twice in this sentence and throughout this sermon! But that's deliberately so, as a contrast to how I usually speak. But that might have an impact upon the wider St Mary's community. A church that has a vicar who's consistently speaking about how God has impacted his or her life is doing a number of things: first, setting expectations about how Christians are to speak about God and God's work; and second, giving permission for those who do see Divine action in such terms to speak of it in that way. Of course we could be in danger of suddenly appearing in the conundrum about the chicken and the egg. Does the vicar shape the ethos of a church, or are only certain types of vicar called to churches with a particular ethos?

We don't need to resolve that dilemma this morning because the key point is: there are different ways of understanding and experiencing God and different ways of responding to that experience. Some may wish to tell other Christians (and non-Christians, for that matter) about their experience, whilst others may not. As a broad brush and speaking personally, I would say both are fine. So, if that's the case, how should we understand this variety of Divine experience?

Perhaps an image would help. Imagine a set of five Russian dolls suitable for what is, after all, Mothering Sunday. All the dolls are laid out on a table. The smallest doll represents each person in the church – not just each individual here this morning but each person who will worship here today. The second doll represents the human family – those closest to each of us. The third doll is our 'family' of friends – maybe friends from school, college or work and neighbours (now and in the past), people we care about. Number four is the family of the church. Not just the church we are in today but the wider church all over the world. And the fifth and final doll represents God, enclosing us all in God's care and love.

And if we imagine putting the whole doll back together, those five dolls one inside the other we get a sense of the all-encompassing nature of God's grace surrounding individuals, families, communities, humanity. That's our inheritance as those created in God's image. God surrounds us with grace and love that's bigger than all the rest of the world put together. That's one way of conceiving the bigger picture of experiencing God. And the question we've been addressing is: How do we share that experience? We *might* share it with words but – remembering St Francis of Assisi's dictum that we must share the Gospel at all times and use if necessary – we may also wish to share our experience of Divine grace through how we *live* our lives.

And that brings me back to our lowest scoring question: I firmly believe that God will work even more powerfully in our church in the coming years. We can't be sure how those surveyed understood that question, but I am sure that the large number of those who felt enthusiastic about St Mary's is convinced that God's grace and love *will* continue to animate, invigorate and energise not only on special days like Mothering Sunday but all our ministry in the future.