***Genesis 12.1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4.1-5,13-17; John 3.1-17***

You might be forgiven for thinking that the whole purpose of faith is to prepare us for life eternal. “Eternal life” features only a handful of times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But, after this first reference in John 3.15, it appears repeatedly; and in John’s letters, and in Romans (though not in today’s passage).

The shortness of our attention spans, and our earthly lives, make us ill equipped to understand eternal life. Scripture says that we are like plants which are growing one day, and burned the next (Psalm 90.5-6). Eternity, on the other hand, is a concept as unfathomable as infinity. We may accept infinity mathematically, yet be unable to grasp it imaginatively, because nothing in our lives is infinite — certainly not we ourselves.

This is a reminder of the limited usefulness of analogies when we try to talk about God. God the Holy Trinity, we might say, is light, or water: a single substance experienced in three forms (origin, process, effect; or vapour, liquid, solid). The inadequacy of such analogies has been recognised almost from the beginning (1 Timothy 6.15-16). It is not unreasonable to suppose that no analogies for God can ever be adequate. But that does leave us with a problem of how to talk about God at all.

So we feel obliged either to say nothing (which is disheartening); or to plough on regardless, using the outmoded, misleading language of parent/shepherd/bird, or anything else which seems at all to reflect the divine, to which we are helplessly yet hopefully attuned.

To say nothing, just because nothing is good enough, is a bad idea in our human relationships; so I can see no excuse for hiding behind apophaticism (the technical term for it) in our faith. Knowing that words are not enough to express my love for someone is not a reason for never telling them I love them. In practical terms, too, we rely on other people talking about God for us to learn about God. If previous generations of Christians had decided that apophaticism was the way forward, Christianity would have died in its infancy.

Thus we cannot, in good conscience, say nothing about God. Instead, we must shoulder our responsibility for saying something, somehow. One thing which may help us in this apparently impossible task is a fundamental distinction in how we know things (formal term: epistemology). There are things (realities), and there are words (which describe those realities). In this instance, we are scrutinising a two-word phrase: we need to relate the two words — “eternal”, and “life” — to something real so that we can make sense of them. That real something is the actual eternal life which Jesus promises us. But we cannot learn the reality from the words, and we absolutely must not mistake the words for the reality.

Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells us more about eternal life. It turns out not to be like a long holiday, or one of those endless childhood Sunday afternoons of the kind that existed before the Sunday Trading Act of 1994. Jesus says, “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17.3).

That verse sounds odd on the lips of Jesus himself, speaking to his heavenly Father. Just like vv.13-17 of this Gospel for Lent 2, he speaks of himself in the third person. Predictably, some readers speculate whether a comment by the Gospel writer (or his source) has crept into the record of Jesus’s actual words.

Human beings take pleasure from coming to know things; and from our faculty of imagination, which enables us to experience others’ talents, traumas, emotions, as if they were our own. We call this empathy. It should come as no surprise that God, our Father, gives us this talent so that we can gain true knowledge, even from things we do not understand, through our capacity for empathising (“experiencing-with”) with those who do

Eternal life is knowing God. We can develop our knowledge of God by using our imagination, and our instinct for making connections between things which (though not identical) share characteristics or properties. We must not abandon our duty to speak of the realities that lie beyond words.

With acknowledgment to Cally Hammond, Church Times No. 8346, 03 March 2023