

Lent 2 – 17 February 2008 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

The scene is the future, several centuries from now. Humanity has been almost obliterated by a robotic technology of their own invention. Hundreds of millions have died, and less than fifty thousand lives remain. This is the premise to *Battlestar Galactica*, so named after a giant space ship that is something of a cross between an aircraft carrier and city. At the helm we find Admiral Adama, a name that calls to mind Adam in Genesis. In the 1970s *Battlestar Galactica* was a swashbuckling and enjoyably silly tv show about humans overcoming the odds of survival in a hostile galaxy. But the show has been remade. What was a simplistic fight between good humans and evil Cylon robots has undergone a serious postmodern twist. In its latest reincarnation not only do the Cylons look, talk, and feel human, they sometimes even think they are human.

In one scene Adama is face to face with a humanoid Cylon called Boomer who is physically and emotionally indistinguishable from regular humans. Adama has good reason not to like her, as Boomer had previously tried to kill him. But as she has changed her allegiance Adama decides to give her a chance to work for the humans. Boomer, surprised at this, asks him how he knows that she can now be trusted. Adama replies to her, 'If I knew you could be trusted it wouldn't be trust. I don't know. That's why its called trust.'

The philosopher Onora O'Neill has suggested that society is facing a crisis of trust. We find it hard to trust those in authority. And its not just politicians. All public figures, from teachers and professors to doctors and nurses, know what it means to live in a society where trust is in short supply.

Clearly there are a great many reasons not to be trusting. We have all experienced the corrosive effects of lies and half truths from those in positions of power and authority. And we have learnt not to trust as a way of shielding ourselves and our loved ones. Better to be safe than sorry goes the saying. And while the law views people as innocent until

proven guilty, in our everyday relations trust is not something we tend to give out willy nilly: instead it is something that has to be earned.

And yet, if trust is always going to be earned rather than freely given, we risk losing sight of what trust really is. One can imagine that the scriptures would record a very different story if Abram asked God to verify and prove his offer to make Abram's name and family great.

Like Adama, though, Abram is lives with not knowing and not having all the answers. In contrast to our world where everyone is telling you that they *do* know, Abram's ability to embrace unknowing anticipates the great insights of mysticism. For although he does not know the implications of what God is asking, like the writer of 'The Cloud of Unknowing', Abram is happy to a journey into the unknown.

As consumers we have been trained to find our every last detail about the things we consume before committing. If we are avid readers we might peruse reviews and solicit friends before judging what to borrow from the library or purchase. And so we make informed decisions, trying to know as much as possible about what we are getting into. And quite right too.

When it comes to more significant parts of our lives we tend to follow the same process. If we are contemplating marriage we hope to find out just a little more about our partner than how photogenic they are. And if we plan on a career change or going to a college we tend to be reasonably thorough at investigating the strengths and weaknesses of our various options.

The problem with all this it seems to me is that it does not transfer that well into the religious sphere of our lives. On the one hand, our religious faith is meaningless if we don't apply ourselves to finding out more about why we believe what we believe. But on the other hand, faith can never be reduced to knowledge. Too often we have translated the word 'faith' as if it were a kind of knowledge. But in fact faith is really a kind of approach to knowledge, a way of knowing. And for

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those of us who prize rationality above intuition, the way of knowing that is faith is always going to be a tough nut to crack.

Nicodemus in our Gospel reading approaches Jesus a little like a consumer wanting to verify the terms of a warranty before committing to a large purchase. He wants to know about the fine print. And he takes what Jesus is saying at face value. His dialogue with Jesus reveals that he doesn't really understand the nature of faith. And like so many modern readers of the scriptures Nicodemus is pedantic in his literalism.

By contrast Jesus reminds Nicodemus that faith has its own internal logic. To use Jesus' own metaphor, the Spirit will blow where it will, and we do not know from or where it goes. Like Abram, Jesus is here holding up uncertainty and unknowing as the path to truth. And unlike our sound bite society, Jesus reminds us that truth is not found in simplistic statements.

The terrible tragedy that unfolded a few days ago on the campus of Northern Illinois University is just the kind of event that defies a simplistic response. And as people who look for God in our lives, so in this situation we have to be open to the possibility that God is in many places. God is with the colleagues, families, friends and loved ones of all those who have died. Just as God is with the authorities and rescue services who prepared for and then responded to such terrible yet all too familiar tragedy.

I imagine that I am not the only person thinking that stricter gun laws and better mental health support might, just might, have gone some way to preventing such a tragedy. But even though this is eerily familiar territory in contemporary American life no amount of speculation or recrimination is going to assuage the pain and grief of the bereaved.

Today we join our prayers with all those praying for the victims of this terrible event. But it also seems to me right that as Christians we encourage our society to rethink the logic both of practically universal

access to firearms and the way in which we provide mental health services.

In recent years this country embarked upon a series of military excursions designed to respond to a post 9/11 desire for greater security. Clearly that model of response to tragedy has not served this country or the world well. And arguably we are less secure now because of the insecurity that war has left in its wake. It seems to me that we could respond in a similar way by militarizing campuses and installing metal detectors at every school. Equally, if we were to do that we would further eviscerate the already fragile trust that shapes society.

The story of Abram reminds us that even when the future looks bleak and unimaginable better days are to come. Even when the odds are stacked against God, somehow God breaks through. And even when it appears that the world is dark beyond measure, somewhere light will be found.

Faith is not able to prove that the light will come. And none of us can prove God's goodness in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. But as Admiral Adama reminds us, if we knew it to be true, there would be no trust. In the same way, if God's love could be verified there would be no faith and no hope, just certainty and apathy. But with faithful uncertainty, and hopeful trust, each of us can venture forwards. As God called Abram so we are called to enjoy the blessings of an unknown future that arrives when we love incautiously, unceasingly and indiscriminately. Amen.