
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Imagination

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I am delighted that you have more questions and, yes, I would be happy to help you wrestle with them. I won't say answer them. You have to live into the kinds of questions that you are asking.

Your question was about the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The Incarnation is the idea that God took the form of a person. The power and presence that we encounter as Other when we engage the world, though immaterial and eternal by nature, became material and embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. We take this as a sign of who God is and how God works.

In other words, we take it as a sign that things matter.

God works in the world through the things of the world. That's why we use water to reveal the gift of baptism, bread and wine to reveal the gift of communion, and oil to reveal the gift of healing. It's in the ordinary that we are touched by the extraordinary.

And, that's why we say things like creation is enchanted by the presence of the Spirit or, in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." Of course, we don't say things like that as much anymore; we're afraid we might sound like Harry Potter!

We have come to believe that something isn't real unless you can rationally prove its existence. If you think about it, though, you can't really prove the truth of the things that matter most to you – the beauty of the mountains, the pain of the poor, or the love a friend. Nor would it be helpful.

Nothing squeezes the life out of something more than completely understanding it!

You might get a sense of this the next time you find yourself laughing with friends. Humor usually comes from imagining something new – joining two things that normally don't go together. I'll bet that you won't feel like you reasoned your way there. I'll bet that you will feel like the joke found you.

It's the mystery of it all that makes it fun.

G. K. Chesterton claimed that "Satan fell by force of gravity." I think that trying to reduce life to rational proofs inevitably leads to our taking ourselves too seriously. And, it's dangerous. The resulting heaviness can be too much bear.

So, if you're looking for God, crack a joke!

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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