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A Generous God

Many years ago, Monty Python did a sketch where they asked a question very similar to one many of us sometimes ask. The question they asked was: “What have the Romans ever done for us?”

The question is asked by people who don't like the Romans because the Romans were an occupying force. The assumption behind the question is that the Romans have done absolutely nothing to help the people they rule over, and that they have done nothing for their country either.

A small group of people ask the question because they are fed up with the Romans, but it takes them to a place they don't expect. It's a conversation that begins with a simple, but honest question: ‘What have the Romans ever done for us?’

Someone in the crowd listening tenders an answer: “The Aqueduct.”

“What? Well, well, yes alright, they did give us the aqueduct.”

“And sanitation!”

“Yes, that too, that's true.”

“And the roads – they're all new now...”

Here's how the conversation ends.

“Well, alright, apart from the aqueduct and sanitation, wines and fermentation, canals and navigation, public baths, streets that are safe at night, cheese and medicine, irrigation, law and education... What have the Romans done for us?”

“Brought peace!”

“Oh, Shut up!”

Turns out the assumption the Romans have done absolutely nothing is not quite as true as it at first might appear. By using humour, Monty Python poses an interesting question.

I'm wondering if there's a similar question real people, not those in a comedy sketch, might ask sometimes, and it might be this. "What has God ever done for us?"

Maybe that's a question you have asked: "What has God ever done for me?"
Maybe this is one way to answer that question.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

⁶ And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

⁹ And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to

govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,^[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

²⁹ Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.
(Gen. 1 v 1 – 31)

What has God ever done for us? He gave us the most extraordinarily creative world to live in. He gave us the sun to give us warmth and light. He gave us the moon to guide us through the night. He gave us the sky, that vast expanse of blue that is sometimes filled with light and colour, sometimes with cloud formations that take our breath away.

He gave us the land which yields its fruit in season, provides us with a place to live and work and dwell. He created the seas, filled with a multitude of life, some of which we are only now just discovering. He filled the land and sea with plants of all kinds, each remarkable in their own way. He created the animals, the ones that crawl, the ones that walk, the ones that fly – and such variety we are still discovering new ones, or finding evidence of ones that once lived but no longer roam the earth.

When God finally speaks to Job after a long, challenging silence, he doesn’t answer any of Job’s questions, he talks excitedly about his creation. Here’s just some of what he says – taken from Job chapters 38,39 and 40.

⁴ “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.

⁵ Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?

⁶ On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—

⁷ while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels^[a] shouted for joy? (Job 38 v 4-7)

²² “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow
or seen the storehouses of the hail,

²³ which I reserve for times of trouble,
for days of war and battle?
²⁴ What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed,
or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth?
²⁵ Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain,
and a path for the thunderstorm,
²⁶ to water a land where no one lives,
an uninhabited desert,
²⁷ to satisfy a desolate wasteland
and make it sprout with grass?
²⁸ Does the rain have a father?
Who fathers the drops of dew?
²⁹ From whose womb comes the ice?
Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens
³⁰ when the waters become hard as stone,
when the surface of the deep is frozen? (Job 38 v 22-30)

“Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn?
² Do you count the months till they bear?
Do you know the time they give birth?
³ They crouch down and bring forth their young;
their labour pains are ended.
⁴ Their young thrive and grow strong in the wilds;
they leave and do not return.
⁵ “Who let the wild donkey go free?
Who untied its ropes?
⁶ I gave it the wasteland as its home,
the salt flats as its habitat.
⁷ It laughs at the commotion in the town;
it does not hear a driver’s shout.
⁸ It ranges the hills for its pasture
and searches for any green thing (Job 39 v 1-8)

¹³ “The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully,
though they cannot compare
with the wings and feathers of the stork.

¹⁴ She lays her eggs on the ground
and lets them warm in the sand,
¹⁵ unmindful that a foot may crush them,
that some wild animal may trample them.
¹⁶ She treats her young harshly, as if they were not hers;
she cares not that her labour was in vain,
¹⁷ for God did not endow her with wisdom
or give her a share of good sense.
¹⁸ Yet when she spreads her feathers to run,
she laughs at horse and rider (Job 39 v 13-18)

“Look at Behemoth,
which I made along with you
and which feeds on grass like an ox.
¹⁶ What strength it has in its loins,
what power in the muscles of its belly!
¹⁷ Its tail sways like a cedar;
the sinews of its thighs are close-knit.
¹⁸ Its bones are tubes of bronze,
its limbs like rods of iron.
¹⁹ It ranks first among the works of God,
yet its Maker can approach it with his sword.
²⁰ The hills bring it their produce,
and all the wild animals play nearby.
²¹ Under the lotus plants it lies,
hidden among the reeds in the marsh.
²² The lotuses conceal it in their shadow;
the poplars by the stream surround it.
²³ A raging river does not alarm it;
it is secure, though the Jordan should surge against its mouth.
²⁴ Can anyone capture it by the eyes,
or trap it and pierce its nose? (Job 40 v 15-24)

God invites Job on a tour of his creation to show him, not the answers to his very human questions of suffering, but to show him what kind of God he really is. Job’s response, in the midst of all his pain, is remarkable: ‘God is enough.’ Job might well have asked: ‘What has God ever done for me?’ from the midst of his pain. Job, it appears, when shown how generous God really is, found that was enough.

As you know, Lisa and I just had the privilege of going to spend some time on Skye. For me, at least, I can't help but see God in a place like Skye. I love mountains – my heart expands when I spend time in the mountains. Mountains have a beauty and a majesty that turns my heart towards God. We spent most of our time on Skye walking in the mountains. It can be hard work, lots of steep ups and downs, and when its not up or down it can be very wet and marshy.

In fact, perhaps the hardest walking on Skye was through the bogs that sit between the mountains – never quite knowing if, with your next step, you're going to sink. It can be slow progress navigating a safe way across the bog!

But somehow, mountains speak to me of the power and majesty of God. They are immovable, strong, powerful and majestic. When walking or climbing in them, they demand and deserve our respect. I can't help thinking the mountains have seen it all, while they stand solid and unshakeable.

I also love a bit of bird watching and this time I remembered my binoculars. I saw a few of the birds on Skye: herons, curlews, stonechats, purple sandpipers, oyster catchers, bullfinches, goldfinches, cormorants, rock pipits, and we had the privilege of seeing sea eagles and golden eagles. Sea eagles are huge – they have a 2m wing span – and they are majestic.

We went on a walk because we hoped to see golden eagles. We walked 10.5 miles and didn't see an eagle! But as we were driving back to our cottage, one flew by the car. We stopped, and it landed in a tree right in front of us and for a few minutes, I was looking right at a golden eagle – who was looking at me and maybe thinking: "If you had eyes like mine, Ian, you wouldn't need binoculars!"

What has God ever done for us? When I'm out in a place like Skye, I'm reminded of God's immense, wonderful and generous world that he has placed us in. When God finished his creation, he looked at it and he saw that it was very good.

But God wasn't finished - he had more to give.

Did you know that when you were born, you were born with your fists clenched? I'm wondering how they might be now?

If you put your finger into the hand of a tiny baby, it will instinctively grab it and close their hand around it. It's natural to be able to clench a fist, to grasp

and clutch and hold onto things. Some people, perhaps, spend their whole life doing just that.

A favourite phrase of toddlers is 'that's mine!' Perhaps as we grow up we clutch at all sorts of things: fashion, popularity, the best grades.... Perhaps we do it when we go to work: promotion, status, better pay, authority, control, power...Perhaps we do it with things: the latest phone, computer, car, a bigger home, nicer clothes...There's a lot more we can grab hold of.

Perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible contains a deep, deep truth. "For God so loved the world, that he gave..." The truth about God is that he is a generous God and a God who gives. He gave his most magnificent creation. The pinnacle of his creation was the people he made in his image to whom he said: "Go and enjoy my creation."

But God didn't stop giving there. All through the story of God and his people, God gives. He gives them food, drink, protection, security, love – but that's not all. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. God...gave...his...Son!

The hands of God are not closed – the hands of God are open – he gives. He gives because he loves you, because he loves you, because he loves you. God's hands to you and me, are open hands. In creation, God opened his hands and gave his excellent best. And God gave Jesus to us.

When he was born his hands were clenched, but as he grew he learned to open his hands – and he gave. He gave himself to those in need, to the poor, the sick, the lonely, the underdog. He opened his hands and cared for them, reached out and touched them and healed them, he gave them food, he freed them from bondage.

One day Jesus went to Jericho. While he was there he stopped to speak to a man who was hiding up a tree because he was a social pariah and nobody wanted anything to do with him. He was hiding up a tree because being in a crowd was a dangerous place for him to be – someone might just serve him summary justice of their own. He was hiding up a tree because he was short and couldn't see. Perhaps he just wanted to see Jesus, not really to meet him. Jesus had other ideas, found him in the tree and said: "Zacchaeus get down because I'm coming round for tea." The crowd was stunned but no more so than Zacchaeus himself.

Zacchaeus was a grabber and a clutcher, someone who had never really learned to open his hands to anyone or anything – except money. Zacchaeus had lots of money and found ways to get even more – and he wanted more. So, he cheated and stole and lied and grabbed and clutched at all the money he could get...which is a little ironic since his name Zacchaeus means ‘clean and innocent’ or ‘pure.’

But that day, Zacchaeus the grabber and clutcher, who lived with his hands closed, met the open hands of Jesus. And, just as it had been for Job, to see the open, generous hands of God, was enough for Zacchaeus. And Zacchaeus, in response to the open hands of Jesus love towards him, began to open his hands. Jesus told Zacchaeus that salvation had come to his house that day!

But Jesus was not finished giving. He allowed men to take his open hands and nail them to a cross. In that act Jesus said: “This is how much I love you!” For God so loved that he gave.

And God still gives. For God is a generous God.

Friends, this is not a talk or a series that is concerned with telling you what to do with your money or your possessions. It’s not a talk or series that’s about how much or little money you may have, or think you have, or about making you feel guilty for what you have or don’t have. Neither is it a talk or a series that’s going to answer most of the questions we might have about the issues of money and possessions, investments, borrowing, lending, budgeting, tithing, debt.

I hope this talk and this series is an invitation to reflect on a question perhaps many of us ask: What has God ever done for us? What has God ever done for me? And to reflect on that question in the truth that God is a generous God, who so loved the world that he gave, and goes on giving.

I’d love to know what Jesus actually said to Zacchaeus that day. As a guess it might have gone something like this:

“Zacchaeus, you are clutching and grabbing at things you think will make you happy – and you are hanging onto them so tightly. But you were never made to live this kind of life. You were made to live in the generous love of my Father, and in community with others. You seem to want to settle for far less, by clinging so tightly to your money and possessions. Soon, I will open my

hands as a gift to you, and allow them to be nailed to a cross. That's because I love you deeply and profoundly – more than you will know. When you open your hands to that love we can work together, and you can know how much you are loved. And you will find the satisfaction you are looking for. I'll be waiting Zacchaeus, whenever you are ready."

Zacchaeus was transformed by the generous open hands of Jesus and he became generous, just like Jesus. Maybe, God is waiting to have a conversation with you and with me. His hands are always open, his generous love always ready to welcome us.

So, I'm wondering; What has God ever done for us?

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