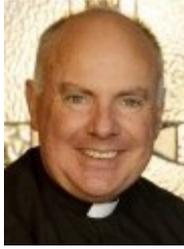


DO WE LIVE IN A SACRAMENTAL UNIVERSE?

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One of the long accepted tenets of Christianity held by many is that we live in a sacramental universe where God chooses to use material things in order to be present to people and where these material things function as vehicles of grace.

The story of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 affirms the goodness of the creation in the mind and action of God ('And God saw that it was good' Genesis 1: 25). God spoke to Moses through a burning bush as we read in Genesis 3: 1-6. God speaks through the material thing, calling to him out of the bush. It is important to notice that God was not a burning bush but that God chose to speak through the burning bush – a thing which is essentially sacramental. God chose to use a material thing in order to be present to and to speak to Moses.

The witness of the Christian Scriptures also affirms that God chose the material, human flesh, in which to be present to people as the incarnate Word or *Logos* (John 1) in the person Jesus Christ. The Gospels witness that it was in human flesh that Jesus Christ proclaimed and the kingdom and lived and died and rose again, being seen and experienced in flesh as the very power and presence of God.

The idea that we live in a sacramental universe has been expressed by many Anglican thinkers, especially in their reflection on the sacraments as we use them in our liturgical life. Archbishop William Temple expressed this view in his Gifford Lectures of 1932-3 and 1933-4. Temple argued that 'Christianity is the most avowedly materialistic of all the great religions' (p. 478). By this he meant that the goodness of creation and the idea of a sacramental universe was God's chosen way and not that Christians were merely addicted to material things. It was, he said, in things of this world that the reality of God was revealed, ultimately in the incarnation of Jesus Christ in human flesh, but also in the Scriptures and in the Church. Materiality was not the initiative of humans but the initiative of God.

For Temple, the material was given a place of respect since it was created and used by God. All this affirms the idea that we live in a sacramental universe.

Earlier Anglican thinkers had said much the same thing. George Herbert, a priest and poet (1593-1633), had spoken of this sacramental principle in one of his well known hymns. Herbert urges us to sing:

*Teach me my God and King
in all things thee to see.*

Herbert is here expressing a sacramentality which suggests that God is to be found and seen in all 'things', including the material things of this world.

If God is to be found in 'all things' then the creation is as God proclaims in Genesis 1, good, and God's chosen way of being present to us as vehicles of grace.

By Reverend **Brian Douglas**