

**Names of God, Part 3: Adonai. Exodus 4:10-17, John 1:43-50. Mike Starkey, 9 June 2024.**

Here's a bit of news you might have missed. In Bradford, in the North of England, they recently started a Wrestling Church. It meets on a Saturday night. They host wrestling matches, and they hold church services with a wrestling theme. Here's a photo from a BBC documentary on it. Can you see the guy's T-shirt: 'Pray, Eat, Wrestle, Repeat'!

Now, you might be thinking, 'Why, would somebody start a wrestling church?' The answer is to do with mission. Lots of people love wrestling. Especially in working class communities in Yorkshire. They follow it passionately like other people follow football. So if you want to do authentic Christian outreach to those people, you can't just sit in church and hope they'll come to you. You need to speak their language and enter their world. Some Christians feel called to take their faith to the wrestling community.

If you want to give this a theological name, it's *incarnational mission*. Like the incarnation we celebrate at Christmas, which means God taking on human form and living among us. Incarnational mission is where you go to a new culture (or subculture) and embed the message in a language, and way of living, that the people understand.

A Brazilian bishop once said: 'God speaks only in dialect'. That's such an interesting quote. He's saying faith is always incarnated in a particular culture.

Of course this is nothing new, it's what Christianity's always done. The early disciples were Jews who spoke a language called Aramaic. As the church expands, it moves into Greek culture and language, and later African cultures and languages and so on. And as the gospel travels, some ideas have to be expressed in new ways. The story of the New Testament is partly about what faith looks like when it's translated from one culture to another.

Every time the gospel meets a new culture it raises new questions. Just one quick example. When early Christian missionaries arrived in Wales and Ireland they found lots of 'holy wells', associated with water spirits, rituals and magic.

The missionaries have a choice. Do they say the wells are evil? Or do they accept them without criticising them? Or do they find another solution? Say, keep the wells but reclaim them as Christian sites: calling them things like St Bridget's Well, and making them a site of Christian pilgrimage? (Which is mostly what happened historically.)

This is so interesting. It's the question of Christianity in culture. Down the centuries different Christians have had very different instincts on all this. Some Christians look at the culture around them and see nothing but worldly distractions. *Cinema is a doorway to im-*

*morality! Pop music is evil! Those sort of clothes and hairstyles are sinful! You mustn't say words like that! Keep yourself separate from the World!*

At the other extreme, you have liberal-minded Christians who say we mustn't speak out or challenge anything in the culture. Because if we do, we'll look reactionary or narrow-minded. So liberal Christians tend to go with the flow, and have a faith that's almost indistinguishable from the rest of the culture. They're scared of speaking out against anything, (other than a narrow band of themes like injustice or intolerance).

These will be the sorts of issues the wrestling church has to think about (I almost said they'll have to 'wrestle with'). What can they celebrate in wrestling culture? And what are the aspects of wrestling culture that may need to be challenged and redeemed?

OK. So why am I talking about wrestling and holy wells, and how Christians should think about the culture they live in? Bear with me! We've reached Part 3 in our series on the names of God. So far we've looked at *Yahweh*, or *Jehovah*. We found *Yahweh* is the personal revealed name of God meaning 'I AM'. We've looked at *Elohim*, the name of God in the first chapter of the Bible, which talks about God as all-powerful Creator.

Today we're looking at *Adonai*. *Adonai* means *Lord*. It's a term of respect. There's an episode in Exodus where Moses talks with God. The Bible writer refers to God as *Yahweh*, but when Moses addresses God in person, Moses calls him *Adonai*. Moses is being respectful and deferential before God.

We said *Yahweh* is printed in English Bibles as LORD in capitals. When you see Lord with a capital L, but the rest of the word not in capitals, that's *Adonai*. It's used more than 300 times in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament. *Adonai* is the normal Hebrew word for Lord or Master.

And of course, that makes *Adonai* a problematic word today. We live in an era that values equality and human rights. People get nervous about language of submission or servanthood. Understandably. In the marriage service, brides rarely promise to obey their husbands. In schools and the workplace, models of learning are based on empowerment and respect, rather than submission to authority.

People no longer give unquestioning respect to institutions their grandparents used to defer to: Parliament, in Britain the Royal Family, the Police, the Church, the upper classes! Cynicism about all kinds of authority, and all institutions, runs very deep today.

And that's affected our churches too. People are nervous of talking about God as Lord or Master, or using words like obedience. People prefer to talk about God strengthen-

ing or empowering us, or helping us fulfil our potential. And of course there's a lot of truth in that. But it's not the whole story, as the name *Adonai* reminds us.

You can't get away from it, the Bible does talk about *submitting* to God. And being a servant and having the attitude of a servant. When Isaiah has a vision of God, he's humbled and made aware of his inadequacies compared with God's glory. He bows down before God's majesty. Our first reading is Psalm 16. In it David says: '*You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.*' The word David uses is *Adonai*: Master.

But our society's uncomfortable with that sort of language. In pastoral churches, people avoid it, in case people think God's like a bossy parent or a Victorian headmaster. In liberal churches people avoid it, because they don't want to sound narrow-minded and judgemental. In Charismatic churches some people call God 'Daddy', and say how approachable God is, in reaction to the very formal religion a lot of them grew up in.

That's all understandable, in today's culture. But the fact remains, the Bible uses language of Lordship and submission. *Adonai*. Why? Because without it, we get a distorted image of who God is, and who we are. Without it, we bring God down to our own size. We end up seeing God as the One who blesses whatever decisions we make ourselves.

We end up with a God who goes along with whatever fads happen to be fashionable in our day. We lose any benchmark outside the culture to help us assess wisely what's good or what's bad, what's ultimately life-giving or what's destructive. God can become little more than our own desires, projected onto the universe. Trouble is, that's not *Adonai*, Lord and Sovereign. That's god in my image, a god who's safe and tame.

The strange biblical claim is that as we learn submission to the will of *Adonai* we begin to discover our true identity, and our true potential. At the heart of the Christian faith is a strange paradox: it's in submission, that we find freedom.

This is why the word *discipleship* is so important. In our Gospel reading, we see Jesus calling a group of people to follow him. Jesus is following the pattern of what Jewish rabbis did. They'd call a small group of students to follow them around and learn from them. It's about journeying and learning as we go.

Discipleship means God loves me as I am. But God loves me so much, he won't leave me as I am. Faith is being on a journey of discipleship, learning what it means to submit to the perfect will of God. (Come to think of it, submission is a theme those people at the Wrestling Church in Bradford should understand VERY well!)

The name *Adonai* reminds me that the search for true purpose and fulfilment is not a me-thing, it's a God-thing.