

THE BIG BLACK BULGING BUMP

I became interested in the main theme of this service when I read a collection of essays by contemporary New Zealanders, *The God Book: Talking about God Today*, edited by Catholic priest Neil Darragh (Accent Publications 2008). Its scope is pretty well outlined in the blurb at the back of the book: This book aims to resource Christians who want to take their part in the public conversation about God. The challenge for religious people is to refine their own ideas and language about God; to articulate as clearly as possible and in language that is as public as possible how we understand the reverberations of God in our world...'

What I've tried to do in this service is open up to our memories some of the ways in which we have talked about God in the past and in the present, through hymns and bible readings and stories. Especially through stories, because they are some of the most powerful means we have of talking about our world and expressing our deepest thoughts and dreams. What is the nature of God? Jesus' story of the loving, yearning father who lost and regained his son has made an indelible stamp on our minds; even more indelible than the theory invented by his followers that the same God had his son brutally murdered to satisfy his own frustrated rage at the wickedness of the world.

I hope you have been able to keep your ears open to the God-talk you and I have engaged in during this service so far. So please keep them flapping while I read you another story. It was written in 1995 by one of our greatest story-tellers, Margaret Mahy. She's dead now, so we can't ask her what she intended by her story. So I can safely make my own guesses. And it's the guesses I want to share with you after you have listened.

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When I first saw the title of the book, I thought that's a book about pregnancy—I was focused on the word 'bump'. But as I turned the pages I began to realise that—yes, the story is pregnant with ideas, but they're not ideas about having babies. They are ideas about how we humans use our imaginations to deal with the mysteries in the world. And surely the biggest mystery of all is summed up in that one word GOD.

I don't know whether Margaret Mahy saw her story as a parable, but I do know that her sharp intelligence and her unparalleled imagination went deeper than witches in trees or lions in meadows or even the Pirate Lady who took her office-bound son to the shore of the ocean and taught him to free his soul and rejoice in the very depths of being.

Let's start with the fact that this is a *funny* book—how refreshing after all those deadpan theological tomes about God—about funny people (though have you noticed how just like us they are?). The story builds to a great comic climax, starting with Roland, the boy next door who can only describe what he sees without making any further sense of it, to a crowd of adults (including an entire brass band), standing on the river bank, loudly arguing that their perceptions are right and the others are all wrong.

Hey, let's not get too serious about names and descriptions, smiles the story. We may become so engaged in squabbling that the object of our arguments may just slip silently out of sight. Academics and theologians take note!

Now there's a running joke all the way through the story about the state of the river. Is it rising or falling? When Basil declares, 'the sun's been shining for days and days, the water's drying up, the river must be falling', Mrs Nooper, the mother of twins, responds, 'No. no! The river's not falling, it's flooding. It's been raining cats and dogs up in the hills.. All that rain has washed a rock down from the hills.' The question is never resolved by the story-teller. We never learn the truth of the matter.

Margaret Mahy knows that the weather is a perennial source of interest for all human beings, partly because—for all the meteorologists' predictions—it remain uncertain and mysterious. Small surprise that the earliest humans thought of it as the gift of the gods.

But our little crowd on the river have no real interest in establishing the factual truth: their opinions just feed the larger argument over the nature of the big, black bulging bump. On a deeper level we might say that, locked in a moment of time, we are incapable of apprehending any reality beyond the limitations of time. We are mortals: the heart of eternity is for ever beyond our vision.

Margaret Mahy also knows that our view of the world and what goes on in it has less to do with objective knowledge than it has with our own personality and character. That sounds too technical, so I'll dive back into the story to

explain what I mean. Mr Wax, the gardener, was weeding his garden when he heard others arguing. He should have stayed in his garden: the French philosopher Voltaire declared that in a world of total uncertainty, of sudden triumphs and equally sudden catastrophes, the only sensible thing to do was weed your own garden. But Mr Wax is curious—as are most human beings—he can't resist climbing over his stone wall to get involved in the argument.

The mayor and the mayoress, who were roller-skating champions, just happened to be rolling by. As they glide *proudly* along—the adjective is important—their sense of self-importance leads them to stop and involve themselves in the argument others are conducting. And that same sense of self-importance leads them to always take the opposite view to their partners. 'The river's not falling, it's flooding' cried the mayor. But the mayoress always argued with her husband: "No, my dear. No! The river's not flooding, it's falling.'

Medieval people thought that Pride was the greatest of all sins, because it alienated you from God. In this modest story pride creates a ridiculous argument between a couple, an unhappy quarrelsome human partnership. Do *you* know these people? I have certainly met them. Are their names today Putin and Trump?

Now it's time to look at *what* in the story these people see. What does their character and their imagination (the truest guide to their inner selves) lead them to suppose what they are looking at? Basil sees a big black bump, Mrs Nooper sees a rock, Mr Wax sees a wrecked pirate ship, the mayor sees a floating garden with a rake sticking out of it, the mayoress sees a reed created by threatening aliens (what a foolishly fearful creature she is! Would she see refugees as terrorists?) Professor Brabazon sees a submerged cottage populated by sexy mermaids (what a romantic imagination lies hidden under his academic suit). The band see a ruined castle, inhabited by ghosts...of the past, I wonder.

And, wonderfully, as they shriek their words at each other, their names for the mysterious bump suggest to me some of the enduring positive and negative images for God, created by believers and unbelievers. Rock! Roof! Ruin! Each one is absolutely convinced that they are right. They might be Protestants and Catholics, Sunni and Shia, Hindu and Muslim, scientist and religious, fundamentalist and liberal, and all those other shades of opinion and belief

bloodily working out their arguments as to who holds the truth of things in this world and the next.

But so far I haven't mentioned one character, the little boy Roland, who started it all off by *noticing* the thing in the river. The little boy who alone sees the departing wonderful creature and receives a secret wink. That's all, just a wink. That deliberate friendly wordless private communication between two people.

Let me read the end of the story again:

I think that here Margaret Mahy gets close to something Jesus once said, answering a question from his own disciples, 'Who is the greatest in heaven?' He called a child, says Matthew, and put the little one in their midst, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Whoever becomes humble as this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'

A little child shall lead them. In the unspoilt innocence of a child's imagination one just might 'see' God—however you name and understand your God. How is your imagination, these days?

AMEN

Colin Gibson