

Sermon preached at St John's, Devizes, 3 September, 2017, 12th after Trinity

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus tell the disciples that he will suffer and be killed, and that they must deny themselves, take up their own crosses, and follow him.

Today is the 78th anniversary of 3rd September 1939, Thereafter came a most viciously cruel conflict in which between fifty and eighty millions lost their lives. This compares with something like forty one million casualties in the Great War, 1914 to 1918. So my subject is suffering.

We pray to "Almighty God" and we sing "Holy holy lord, God of power and might". And so on. We know that God loves us, indeed that he is love. This brings us to the problem called Theodicy, which asks how a loving God who is in control can be believed in, given the state of the world. What is God up to?

Simone Weil, the great French philosopher writes:—

'I feel ceaselessly and increasingly torn, both in my intelligence and in the depth of my heart, by my inability to conceive simultaneously and in truth of the affliction of humans, the perfection of God, and the relation between the two.'

This can particularly strike home when the problem is close up and personal.

I recently enjoyed a wonderful flash of serendipity. Quite by chance I came across a theologian called Mark Oakley, now a Canon Residentiary of St. Paul's Cathedral, and was greatly impressed. He tells how, when he was training for ordination, he was in the chaplaincy team at St Mary's Hospital and visited a young man who was soon to die from the effects of aids. His parents were angry. So was Mark. When the mother said "I used to believe in God. I find it so difficult now". Mark replied "So do I". Soon he lost his faith. He writes "I could see how I had crafted God just how I wanted him but he was not big enough contain the experiences I had never had before". Fortunately he had wise and experienced friends who helped him to relax, to believe that a world can be rethought and that God might yet dwell in new and unexplored territory. He was greatly helped in this by the Christian poet R. S. Thomas.

So what sort of Christian was Thomas? Certainly a contemplative. Not at all a systematic theologian. He was very much a subversive, questioning, challenging Christian, for whom the scandal of the Cross, the crucifixion of a supremely good, innocent man was central to his belief. He did not believe in *theories* of the Atonement. He would go no further than Paul: "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." His attitude was well described by D.Z. Phillips in his book on Thomas, "Those who believe in a self-emptying God can only worship him by sharing his nature ... As long as we think of God as providing explanations for the world's ills, the religious insight will elude us. We think of knowledge as power and control. God's knowledge is then thought as supreme power and control. The kind of knowledge of God Thomas wants to show us in his poetry is very different. This knowledge is only possible through sacrifice, a dying to self, so that God can come in at the right place. The seeker of justifications of the ways of God to men wants to know why things happened to him in just the way they did. The man who comes to see that no such reasons can be found, who sees the givenness of his life as an act of grace, has come towards a knowledge of God."

This resonates with what the great German martyr Bonhoeffer wrote when in prison with no expectation of release, "Only a suffering God can help us". Surely this is what God is. Let us hear what Paul wrote to the Philippians:—

"Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross". We get it quite wrong if we take this as meaning that Christ divests himself of the Godhead, of all that makes him God of God, light of light, very God of very God. On the contrary, in making himself nothing, emptying himself of ego, in his utter surrender of himself in love and loving service Jesus discloses and lays bare the ground of *God's* being and of human being as ... love. God's self-giving is eternal

reality, the very essence of the divine nature, which is none other than patient, persuasive, self-sacrificing, suffering love, manifested in Christ crucified. Mark Oakley writes “Those who focus their prayers on the crucified Christ will never expect God to intervene, for it is the nature of love not only be expressive but to be limited by its vulnerability They will only hope for his presence.

Etty Hillesum knew this. To me she is one of the great Saints of the Holocaust. She was a Dutch Jew who volunteered to help in the hospital of a transit camp and to share in the fate of her people, and later was sent to Auschwitz where she died at the age of 29. Her diaries and letters largely survived.. Her God is someone to whom she makes promises but from whom she expects and asks nothing. I quote “I shall try to help you, God, to stop my strength from ebbing away ... one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me; that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves ... Alas, there does not seem very much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You, and defend Your dwelling place in us to the last”.

You may think this has been a rather gloomy sermon, with more questions than answers. So let's cheer up with one of R S Thomas's poems:—

The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price,
the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

I leave the last word with Our Lord, St. John's Gospel, 16th Chapter:—“In the world ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world”.