

Sermon Preached at John the Baptist Deizes May 7th 2017 –4th of Easter

Is our faith a rational, reasonable faith? ... Yes. Of course.... Up to a point. And only up to a point. Today I shall be speaking about exploring the mysterious hinterland beyond that point, with help of the great priest /poet R. S. Thomas.

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 --a scandal not withstanding the Resurrection -- 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." He had no answer to question of theodicy, as theologians call it: "How does an all-loving and all-powerful God allow so much suffering in His world?". Thomas felt that the man who comes to see that no reasons for this suffering can be found, who sees the givenness of his life as an act of grace, has come towards a knowledge of God. The poet's stock-in-trade was not answers but questions, but he enables us to live creatively with the questions.

Thomas edited the Penguin Book of Religious Prayer, and in his Introduction he wrote "Over every poet's door is nailed Keats's saying about negative capability. Poetry is born of the tensions set up by the poet's ability to be (Keats's words) 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'".

Symbolism and metaphor were, as befits a poet, of great importance to Thomas. We can never say : "it's only a metaphor. It's not real". We cannot discern the reality of God and his Son in some sort of scientific terms. He wrote "It is within the scope of poetry to express or convey religious truth, and to do so in a more intense and memorable way than any other literary form is able to. Religion has to do first of all with vision, revelation, and these are best told of in some sort of poetry.

in the New Testament we have a tremendous accumulation of metaphors. Paul has a famous one: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal". In the first three Gospels we have Christ's parables. A favourite method of his teaching was through these metaphorical stories. But St. John is, I suggest, a greater poet than the other Evangelists — perhaps even than St. Paul. Indeed John begins his Gospel with a metaphor: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Thomas writes "in sense he is God's metaphor and speaks to us so". Recently I heard of a schoolgirl who was asked what it means that

“Jesus was the Word” ? She replied “God tells us all we need to know through Jesus”. Whether that came from an excellent teacher or direct from the Holy Spirit I do not know, but it is magnificent and I shall never forget it.

We have a second powerful metaphor in John’s first chapter when the Baptist declares of Jesus “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”. This has been a part of our lives and our worship ever since the Fourth Gospel was published. Then as we go on through the Gospel we have the series of the great seven I AM metaphors: “I AM the bread of Life, the light of the world, the door of the sheep, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the True Vine. A wonderful picture of the Son of God and of His relationship with us His children.

Thomas believed in epiphanies, happenings through which we might somehow sense God's presence, hints or intimations which come sometimes through prayer or prayerfulness, or sometimes pure, surprising gift. He wrote in an autobiography “Without warning and without effort a little poem formed in my mind .. and certainly as with a poem it is thus that he sometimes chooses to come. But also, just as a poem sometimes comes after a very long period of thinking and searching, doesn't God come in the same way after a long period on your knees, or of reading and studying? And yet it cannot be proved and demonstrated. It isn't the result of long and refined reasoning, but communication that is at once mysterious and direct.” This surely is what we mean by contemplation.

I end by quoting four of his poems, which I think show how poetry can help to bring us towards God and his Son. I may offer a word of comment but I shall not attempt to explain any poem. Each has its meaning, its truth, for each of us – and may not yield it quickly. Thomas bears reflection. The sermon will be on the Church website for you to read the poems again.

The first poem was inspired by Michael Angelo’s sculpture of the dead Christ brought down from the cross to rest in Mary’s arms.

Pieta

Always the same hills
Crowd the horizon,
Remote witnesses
Of the still scene.

And in the foreground
The tall Cross,
Sombre, untenanted,

Aches for the Body
That is back in the cradle
Of a maid's arms.

The first word “always” is important. The cross is not a one-off event 2000 years ago. It has remained central to our faith since the first Good Friday.

The Moor

It was like a church to me.
I entered it on soft foot
Breath held like a cap in the hand.
It was quiet.
What God was there made himself felt,
Not listened to, in clean colours
That brought a moistening of the eye,
In movement of the wind over grass.
There were no prayers said. But stillness
Of the hearts passion – that was praise
Enough; and the mind's cession
Of its kingdom. I walked on,
Simple and poor, while the air crumbled
And broke on me as generously as bread.

Thomas loved the concept of bread, Christ's gift of himself: I am the Bread of Life.

Now two epiphanies.

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.

In a Country Church

To one kneeling down no word came,
Only the wind's song, saddening the lips
Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;
Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,
Bats not angels, in the high roof.
Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long,
And saw love in a dark crown
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree
Golden with fruit of a man's body.

This wonderful vision beautifully rewards the waiting in contemplative silence.

Thanks be to God

John Stott