

## Good Friday 1<sup>st</sup> Address: The Reality of God

There is a dangerous tendency we have as human beings to deny reality or to escape from it when we are confronted with life's problems. To try to escape into some fantasy world is a great temptation, but ultimately we need to face reality if we are to be enabled as human beings to fulfil our fundamental need to love and be loved, to feel we are worthwhile both to ourselves and to others. So let us be clear why we are here today. We are not here to escape into some religious fantasy world that will sugar life's bitter pill. We are not here to watch an innocent and remarkable religious leader who was subjected to a particularly horrible form of death regularly practised in the Roman Empire: human religious leaders subjected to horrible deaths have been commonplace in the history of the world and, much as we admire them, we do not set aside a day each year in which to spend most of the day thinking about them. We have not come to watch a man however great. We have come to watch and more than watch, as far as we can, to be identified with the human face of God, the Crucified God. That is the reality of Good Friday.

The reality of God is the first and greatest reality of our lives and yet sadly enough it is that very reality which has become for most people today a profound unreality. As far as the majority of people in our society is concerned today, it would be true to say that the non-relevance of God is simply accepted as a normal state of affairs. Religious indifference is largely the result of the lack of relevance of particular historical forms of

Christianity to the basic questions the human race is asking about the future of the world. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian hanged by the Nazis, who asked the question, perhaps the most important question of our faith today: *“What should we do to make Christ the Lord of the irreligious?”* It can equally be said that no philosophy of life which seeks to give answers to the problems and insecurities of the world finds its mark in an age which has become increasingly disillusioned and often despairing. In fact religious theory takes its place alongside all kinds of apparently philosophical explanations which have failed to provide a definitive answer to our questions, like Where are we going as a human race? What is it all for? What does human life mean? Communism, for example, is now as distrusted or more so in its appeal than Christianity appears to be as an explanation of life.

I think we have to admit that irrelevance of belief to the problems of human existence may very largely be the fault of Christians themselves. Many Christians would have to admit that, when it comes to being tested by life’s vicissitudes, their faith has become unreal and that this unreality stems from their efforts to be honest with their actual experience and with the issues of the contemporary world and its questions sounding within themselves. It is a sad commentary on religious belief that many of the most outwardly successful expressions of such belief are those which have gone far away from the rational and have become emotional ghettos of fundamentalism encapsulated from the world and its reasoning. They have proved attractive because they provide illusions of security in an

increasingly insecure world. They attempt to provide a God who will buttress us against the hostile world. Again Bonhoeffer has something important to say here: *“God is not a reassuring background music to my life. God is not a buttress to shore up the contradictions of existence. The only God who can be of any value to me in the world of real life is the God who shares the reality with me and does not even try to protect me from it.”*

So much of this problem has come about, I believe, because of a general misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Love of God. We have preached for generations the “God of Love”, and rightly so, but in that preaching, due often to our misunderstanding of the nature of love, we have fallen into great difficulties. Because we are more inclined to think of the gratifications of love than of the vulnerability of love, we find it difficult to cope with situations in which our understanding of love appears to be defeated. We find evil flourishing in all parts of the world, we find excess of violence, of injustice and abuse, which seem to grow rather than diminish. We find someone whom we have loved, have cared for and prayed for reduced by a stroke or dementia from an intelligent, witty, loving human being to a form of lifeless existence which seems pointless. We find speaking about the wisdom of old age reduced to the incontinence and helplessness of a geriatric ward. Over recent decades but fortunately less so now, we have found the scourge of AIDS sweeping away countless young lives and some are reduced in response to talking about God’s wrath, because only thus can they get rid of their hang-ups about sexuality. So time and time again in the world we seem to see that which according to

our own understanding of love has no meaning, no purpose, no gain either for the victims or for those who care for them. We speak of it as useless pain, useless anguish and we ask “Why, Lord, why?” and again we give scope to the enemies of religion to cry, “How can you believe in a God of Love when such things happen?” We find ourselves time and time again trying to explain away God when we confront apparently unanswered prayer, apparently innocent suffering and even to ourselves we cry, “Why should this happen to me?” when things go wrong. So great is our inborn belief even as Christians, that life is meant to be happy, a pleasure garden, the original Eden before the Fall.

But this is where it is not so much our idea of God as a God of Love which is wrong, as the unreality of those ideas when we use the word “Love”. Love at its deepest level is not the love which can be shown to be loving when all things go well with me, when life is easy and happy and at its pleasantest. Even love on the human level is not like that. Let me try to illustrate this from a story, I think by Franz Kafka. A woman to her intense pain heard judgment delivered upon her son at his death and he for his misdoings went to Hell. She in her pain and grief battered on the gates of Hell crying, “Let him out, let him out”. The doors remained firmly shut. At last wearied with crying and realising the uselessness of her cries she battered again but this time cried, “Let me in, let me in” – and the doors were opened to her.

Love at its deepest level is not the love which cries, “Let me or let him or her out of the worlds of pain and misery, but the love which cries, “Let me

in". That is the God of love we believe in, the God who is crucified. When we ask not so much, "What does the Cross mean for me?" but what does the Cross mean for God, then we find ourselves confronted with that extraordinary and yet humanly necessary answer to a world whose secularism is based upon its views of success. The God who loves is the God who allows himself to be driven to the Cross; the God who loves us is the God who wills to go into Hell that we might live; the God who loves us is the God who in the hell which we have made of his world does not stand aside from that hell but becomes one with it and dies with us when we kill ourselves. That is why it is so terrible to speak of a God who shows his judgment on the AIDS victims by their suffering and death. The God who is love is the God who hugs the contaminated body of the AIDS victim, who allows himself in love to be contaminated, to touch, to kiss, to be there. The God who is love is the God who is incontinent with the incontinent, helpless with the helpless, weak with the weak, oppressed with the oppressed, never separated. It is just because we know he is there, that we can bear the humiliation and the suffering. It is just because the Cross has shown us that kind of God, that we know that without him we are lost. We do not expect release from the pain but we do know He is with us in the pain. Bonhoeffer again puts it well, *"God let himself be driven from the world to the Cross; God in the world is weak and unarmed and this is how and only how he is present and helps us."* Christ does not bring help through omnipotence but through his weakness and suffering. It is false religion which is constantly feeling thwarted when God's supposed

omnipotence does not immediately bring help when asked for to relieve pain and suffering.

Moreover the God who goes with us in our poverty, our failure, our weakness is the God who shows up the superficiality of the secular world with its god of success, of instant pleasure and instant happiness and which moans when there is frustration of such demands. It becomes not the case that God is irrelevant to the true needs of the human race, but that the secular world does not know what to do when things go wrong save to blame and ignore. God did not become a human being according to our misguided perceptions of what it is to be human. He became the kind of human being we do not want to be: an outcast, accursed, crucified. But this God who is capable of suffering is a God who is involved with our human need. If he were only omnipotent he would himself be incomplete to the needs of the human race, for he would not experience helplessness and powerlessness and that is no use to me because I do experience these things. The one who cannot suffer cannot love. Is it not our experience that those who love greatly are usually not those whose lives are easy but those who have known the depths of living? Those are the people to whom we go when life is dark; that is the God to whom we go when life is dark – the God who hangs upon the Cross.

This then is what faith means, the faith which speaks to the understanding of an age like ours. It is the faith which does not look for securities, nor is constantly wanting that life shall hold no pain. Rather it is the faith that

knows that the God of the Cross does not and, if he is true to the nature of his love, could not automatically and immediately make all things right, but rather lets be what goes wrong, suffering and redeeming the consequences in a love that does not let go. So when everything is going wrong for us, at a profound level in God everything is all right, for everything is the love which is with me, involved with me in the depths. Love does not let go. Never, never, never. It is only lack of love that lets go. Perhaps I do not have the courage of a previous century proclaiming with strong confidence “Firmly I believe and truly” (as in Cardinal Newman’s hymn), yet I do have the confidence that comes from the inner love of God, the God who is most with me when he appears to be absent from me and I can on this Good Friday whisper, if not shout:

Barely I believe yet truly  
God is One and God is Three  
God is love and seen most fully  
Hanging from the wintry tree.