

Good Friday 4th Address: The Reality of Dereliction and Death

Now we come to that difficult subject of Death, the Reality of Death and the sense of loneliness and dereliction that can accompany it.

Perhaps the most strange and yet the most comforting of the Words spoken from the Cross are these, *“My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?”* If Christ is fully human, then a sense of Godforsakenness must be his too. Has not each of us at some time in our life experienced a sense of Godforsakenness? Would anyone here not admit that at some point in their life they have cried out too, *“My God, why, why, why?”* Why this pain, why this horror, why this injustice? We see that our life together on this planet is full of such things. Why do human beings behave so vilely towards each other? Why do governments murder their own people? Why do the wealthy nations of the world not have more determination to stamp out poverty and make it history? Why do majorities always seem to want to oppress and persecute minorities, whether those differences be racial, religious or sexual? And it is not only against the world that we cry out, but also against God. Why did that teenager hang himself on Christmas Eve? Why did a priest friend of mine, having recently suffered the death of his wife from a brain tumour, then have to cope with the death of his younger son from a hit and run driver on the very day that son got engaged and was on his way to give the ring he had just bought to his fiancée? Why did that young couple’s baby have to die when they had wanted so long to have a child? These are questions I have had to face in my ministry. Many clergy

could add their own and you too could supply plenty of examples. Why, why?

Jesus knew about this experience too. In Gethsemane he prayed to be spared the ordeal ahead of him. It seemed, as he hung upon the Cross, that that prayer for healing and release had been ignored. My God, why? He felt a sense of Godforsakenness.

As we try to come to terms with these experiences we gradually realise that the Whys, the questions, will not always be answered this side of the grave. That isn't easy for us. We need our securities. We need material security to protect us from want; security of good relationships to protect us from frustration and dependence; the security of definite answers to protect us from doubt; the security of the institution to protect us from anarchy. But God will not allow us to rest in our securities. The search for truth is a search which goes beyond securities, resting not in easy answers but in still more searching. The search for love is the search which takes us beyond the shelter of a human love to the greater depth of the love of God and the inner life which is our ultimate unity with God. We cannot rest content any more than Christ could rest content on the lower and easier levels of life. As Bonhoeffer once said, we have to learn to live as though God were not there. The cry from the Cross is the cry of a man in search of that ultimate unity with God, which leads him through the dark night of that feeling that God is not there at all. Disillusionment, despair, scepticism, blasphemy are

states only possible for a man who cares about existence: they are perverse indications of a will to believe.

So then, this cry of Christ from the Cross is not a cry of unbelief but of belief. It is because we believe fundamentally that God is love, because we believe life does have meaning, that we seek explanation for what does not seem in our understanding to fit. If we did not think that God is love but rather, like the French writers and philosophers Camus and Sartre, that life is absurd, random and meaningless, then there would be no protest. There would be no expectation that any God would come to rescue us in our difficulties. It is just because suffering and injustice seem contrary to belief that we cry our "Why?" That is also the experience and cry of the prophets in the Old Testament and of the Psalmist: *"How long shall the ungodly triumph, flourishing like a green bay tree?"* St Paul constantly asks God to take away that particular affliction from which he suffered, which he describes as a thorn in the flesh, but it was not taken away. St Teresa of Avila, when the wagon in which she was travelling overturned and deposited her in a filthy ditch, is reported to have exclaimed, *"I am not surprised, Lord, that you have so few friends, if that's the way you treat them"*. I once read about a priest who was going to visit his 12 year old daughter in hospital. He was taking her a birthday cake. She was dying of leukaemia. On the way he calls in at a church to pray for her. When he arrives at the hospital, he finds that she has just died. He goes back to the church and throws the cake at the crucifix, breaking down in tears on his

knees crying “Why, why?” Jesus railed against God. Thank goodness. And so have I.

But let us remember that we can only rail against those we trust and love. You can be angry with those you love and you can accept anger from those who love you. It is only strangers with whom we cannot be angry. How often in my ministry have I heard of people who have left the Church because they were upset with the vicar, something he had said or done or not done. Why did they have to leave? Perhaps because neither they nor the vicar loved each other sufficiently to be able to be angry with each other. I can, therefore be angry with God. I can bitterly complain that he has forsaken me, because I know the opposite: that he has not, because the moment he did forsake me he would not be God nor would I have any faith in him. When I cry out against God, I know that I am safe in doing so and perhaps I shall only be able to enter into real relationship with him when I have cried out.

Let us be clear. When Jesus cried out those words of dereliction and abandonment from the Cross, he is not asking for compassion for himself. He is seeing his rejection or seeming rejection by God as a test of the truth of all he has taught about God. If God is good then God must somehow vindicate himself. The cry of Jesus begins with the opening words of Psalm 22, but the final verses of that same psalm are an affirmation of belief in a vindicating God. If God is love and Jesus is the incarnation of that love, then God must be vindicated or love will fail. Jesus himself on the Cross

entered into that darkest of human experiences, the silence and absence of God. But it was precisely at that moment, that God showed his solidarity with his suffering and death. God is there with him on the Cross. Jesus cries out his experience of Godforsakenness, but he does not cease to believe in God. For only minutes later he is able to say "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit". Elie Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of the Nazi death camps, tells of the occasion when his whole camp was summoned together to witness the SS hanging two Jewish men and a youth with piano wire. Being heavier the two men died quite quickly, but the young lad lingered in his tortured death throes for nearly half an hour. Someone whispered to Wiesel as he watched this terrible death, "Where is your God now?" Wiesel felt within himself the reply rising up, "Where is he? He is there hanging on the gallows". When the cynics of this world looking at the pain and distress and cruelties of the world cry out to us who claim to believe "Where is now your God?", the answer comes through Christ, "He is here with me, struggling to make sense of what is happening, but continuing to know that God will be vindicated, because God is God in the crucified Jesus".

I cannot prevent death, the final reality of all life's realities. Each of us one day will have also to cry, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit". Death is the only certain fact to life. Whatever our status, however much of life still lies before us, each of us here will die. So since it is a very certain fact, it should be treated responsibly. But here is where we face a great lack of reality. Death is a taboo subject. Life must be prolonged at all costs,

however useless and hopeless the life must be. Medical advances can keep the body alive now far longer and our improving standards in the West mean we could have a much longer old age (thus causing a pension crisis!), but prolonged senility is not my idea of life, even though we must face old age with grace and dignity. Society generally seems to believe in death avoidance at all costs, and when it comes, as it inevitably does, death is to be dealt with as quickly as possible. The local crematorium allows 20 minutes. Mourning is something that has to be got over as quickly as possible and the doctor can give you something to help you cope. Christ will have none of this escapism. He prepared his friends for his death, though they found it hard to take. He never dodged the fact that death faced him and prepared for it with dignity and that wrestling with aloneness which is the real facing of the agony and pain of death. So how then do we face death with reality?

God like any true parent allows us to accept responsibility for our lives. You have probably heard people say of someone who has died, "He is better off now". The Bible knows nothing of such easy universalism: "*What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?*" It is the loving Christ who says to the uncaring and unloving at the Judgment parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew ch. 25 "*Depart from me*" and to the child abuser, "*It were better for him that a millstone were put around his neck and he be cast into the sea*". There is judgment – not the self-righteous judgments we make on each other, but what St John of the Cross called "the judgment of love on love". And that can be a terrible

judgment. Christ would teach us that at every moment of our life we are being judged by love on love. Every moment we are being solicited by God for his love, but if I refuse that solicitation and choose to live in the shallows of life, then I may run the risk of shutting the door on eternal life.

That Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran whom I have already quoted from today in "The Prophet" says this: *"If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life. For life and death are one even as the river and the sea are one"*. All life is both going to death and coming to life. The more we live each day at one with God, the more at the moment of death we come alive. Jesus, because of his perfect 'at-oneness' with God was at once, as it were, reabsorbed into the Godhead. We for our part may have to be purged of that which at death is still imperfect, before there can be that complete at-oneness with God. But if we have died in grace, then we are on the way to that coming alive, which is the ultimate end of all and the meaning of heaven: to be at one with God. But just as in life we have to be continually risking the unknown, the unfamiliar, the disturbing, so one day we face the greatest risk of all – to go into the unknown without any of the securities we have so carefully built up in life, knowing that our death is the dark face of our eternal coming to life.

Because of the uncertain timing of death none of us can know when it may come to us. So being prepared is both prudent, sensible and facing reality. Make a will and update it when necessary. Make your funeral wishes known or even give detailed instructions – your executors are not bound by

them but will do their best to carry them out. An older friend of mine now dead used to write at the front of his new diary each year "In the event of serious illness or an accident send for an Anglican priest". Good advice. Sacramental grace is meant to be available and used and pastoral ministry to the sick and dying, and the bereaved, is designed to assist the person concerned and their family and friends to come to terms with the journey they are on.

I suspect that even the most devout of us have doubts about what happens after death. My own faith is very simple on this point. True love by its nature cannot be destructive, only creative. If God is love, my end as made in his image cannot be annihilation, unless by my self-alienation from him I not he have made no other end possible. A God who utterly destroys would be no God of love. So my belief in God and in life beyond death hangs together. Either there is life or there is no God. There is no other alternative. Christ faced dereliction and death but he knew the certainty of the God of love who holds all things in life. That life we shall begin to celebrate after the silence of Holy Saturday on Easter Day. Today we share the tragedy. On Sunday we share the triumph. Let Kahlil Gibran speak the final words:

"Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.

And when you have reached the mountain top then shall you begin to climb,

And when the earth shall claim your limbs then shall you truly dance".