

Good Friday 2nd Address: The Reality of being Human

The story of human life as we read it in the Bible seems from the beginning to have been a history of split consciousness. On the one hand we find humankind described as made in the image of God, endowed with power from God, made by God steward with responsibility for all of God's creation. This is the reality. On the other hand from the beginning in that great myth of the Fall, the unreality is revealed: although made in the image of God man and woman are not happy with that. They want to dispose of God, they want to be gods themselves and they want it, like everything else in life, to be without much effort. The serpent is very understanding of this fundamental human weakness. He says, "You can be gods, it's dead easy. All you have to do is to stretch out your hand and take the fruit, eat it and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The first bit of unreality has been made and, as a consequence, the first separation from the God whose power lies not in omnipotence but in powerlessness and love. This same unreality has been pursued ever since. For once we begin to imagine that we are gods, then we begin to worship success, power, results or whatever other deities we aspire to. Once they might have been deities of fertility or good hunting, but now in the last hundred years or so they have been The Fatherland and nationalism, race, class, profit motive, consumer economy, the cult of youth, even human rights. Moreover, because we want to be gods and gods must not be attacked or criticised, we tend to regard any attack on our own thoughts or ideas or

those of our group as attacks on ourselves, which then have to be resisted, often with fatal aggression.

As long as we identify ourselves with gods then we cannot recognise the differences of others. We tend then to love only what we like and we only acknowledge people who believe and think as we do. People like ourselves support us and we feel comfort and strength from them and, of course, it confirms our own superiority – our own godlikeness. People who differ from us disturb us, because they question our godlikeness. So we tend to love those who love us and avoid or even hate those who are different from us. This is exactly what Christ encountered and what drove him to the Cross. He reflected neither the religious authority of the Pharisees and Sadducees nor the civil authority of Pilate and Herod. He only reflected the reality of God, who does not judge by results or by what makes us feel good and strong, but who rather goes alongside us in our weakness. But this incapacity to accept those who are not like us runs all through society; to love only what is like oneself is narcissistic.

But since the Fall the human animal has been narcissistic. We find it in politics both international and national. We have to have our allies and our enemies and what the first does is accepted but what the second does has to be treated with suspicion, even though in fact both may act in the same way when threatened. We find it in the antagonism and adversarial stance between political parties in their godlike status, in which nothing they do is wrong, all wrong is done by one's opponents. The same hatred of the

different reveals itself in the phobias of human beings: towards Jews, ethnic minorities, or those of a different sexual orientation: all seem to threaten our own superiority, lest that which we hate should appear in ourselves.

The same runs through all our ideologies and institutions, even the Church itself. The more strongly human beings decide what kind of divinity they will worship – fundamentalists of all persuasions, Catholics, Protestants, Shia, Sunni – the more authoritarian the cult, the more there will be persecution, intolerance, quite bitter struggles, as we have witnessed in Northern Ireland, or indeed in parts of the Muslim world at this time. The really dangerous moment is when we pass from “This is what I believe” to “This is what you must believe”. The former Archbishop of York, John Habgood, got it right when he said some years ago: *“The people who worry me in life are not the uncertain but the too certain”*.

The other alienation from reality lies in what Freud called the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. And here religion is at one with Freud. Either human beings remain dependent on the pleasure principle, that is, on life as the instant satisfaction of their infantile wishes, or they mature into accepting the reality principle and come to terms with reality. To go back to the myth of the Fall, the bribe of the serpent “You shall be as gods” contained no effort. It was rooted in the pleasure principle – just stretch out your hand, your wish to be like God will be instantly satisfied. We are rooted in the pleasure principle in our society

– instant credit, instant food, instant ease of access to everything at the touch of a button. But the reality of life is not like that. There are no instant godheads where all will be well with no effort. When Jesus says, “You shall be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect”, he meant such perfection is only reached through the many deaths of life towards eternal life – something very different from the promise of the serpent. If we seek for maturity in living this life, then we seek it through coming to terms with pain, suffering, loss and identification with the weak and the poor and not by the avoidance of reality. For Christianity has never preached life by the avoidance of death, but only life through death.

Notice also where this temptation to be instant gods led human beings in that myth of the Fall. First it led them into the incapacity to face reality in themselves. They had to cover their bodies with the symbolic fig leaves we see depicted in Renaissance art. The openness, the nakedness with each other and with God was no longer possible. They had to form stereotypes and could not feel secure unless they could hide behind them. Gradually these stereotypes become the ones that society expects of us and so we conform to them. Jung speaks of this when he says: *“Society expects every individual to play the part assigned to him as perfectly as possible, so that a man who is a parson must not only carry out his official duties objectively but must at all times and in all circumstances play the role of the parson in a flawless manner. Society demands that each must stand at the post allotted to him be he teacher, priest, policeman, shop assistant.”* Of course it is probably desirable that in a general way we should conform to the role

or fig leaf assigned to us. But when that becomes so fixed, that we see ourselves as identified with it, so that whatever in us does not conform has to be suppressed or hidden, then an intolerable burden is placed upon us. So careful are we to place the “good front” to the world, that we do not know what to do with our shadow side, which does not fit in with this marvellous front. Or rather, we DO know what to do with it: we project it onto others. Hence the last bit of the myth of the Fall: the incapacity to take responsibility for their actions. The man blamed the woman, the woman blamed the serpent, the serpent probably blamed God for putting the tree there in the first place. This is the first example of that most frequent tendency of human nature and of almost every bureaucracy – “passing the buck”. This constant projection onto other people of that which I do not wish to own about myself is a very common failing of human nature. It accounts for that strong element of judgmentalism which many Christians have, especially towards those who are felt to be beyond the pale of respectable society. In fact it seems to work mostly in areas of sexuality or political opposition. It is fairly easy to see why I should want to project on to others. For when I project my shadow self on to another, they become the stereotype of what I fear, despise or dislike in myself. I am able to maintain a good opinion of myself because what contradicts my self-image is projected on to them.

How then can we move away from these unrealities towards our true nature which is to be made in the image of God? Once again we have to look at the reality of God as distinct from the unreality. As long as we tend

to think of God along the classical Greek philosophical lines where God must be impassible (that is, not affected by feelings), immovable, perfect, omnipotent, a being who cannot in anyway be concerned with the dark side of ourselves and who cannot even understand that side until we change, then, of course, we must try to pretend and to deceive God. We must be successful because our God is all powerful; we must be respectable because our God is respectable; we must be judging and blaming the more disreputable sinners because our God is a God of Judgment. We can only please him if we are like him, so if we conceive of him as respectable, successful, judging and condemning, we shall be like that too. Indeed, as I look at the history of religion, it is all too obvious what extraordinary ideas of God people have had, because what extraordinary people religious people often are and how grim and lacking in joy! No wonder the poet Swinburne could write *“Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean, the world has grown grey with Thy breath.”*

But as we have seen, this is not the crucified God. The crucified God enters into man’s sin and man’s Godforsakenness. He stands crucified between two criminals with whom he shares the humiliation without separation. He speaks to the mocking crowd and to the religiously respectable, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”. And to the penitent thief beside him he promises a place with him in the life of Paradise. In his death on the Cross God is saying that love is not separation from the sinner, not religious respectability, not judgment and condemnation of the outcast, but unity with the sinner, identification with the outcast and the disreputable.

The incarnate God is and can be experienced in the humanity of everyone. We do not need to dissemble and be other than we are to experience the fellowship of God with us. Rather God lays aside all dissembling and becomes what God is in this human God crucified outside the gate of respectable society. So I do not need to be successful, careful, or wear a mask of conventional goodness. If I am loved when I have little to give, when I am not very useful, when I am all too conscious of my many defects, when I am not respected, not needed, not able to cope – if I am loved when I am like that, then I can really feel that love is the power that moves the universe, because there is nothing of life which God has not taken up and become one with. God has taken up all of life, real life as it stands under death, sin and guilt. So I can accept all life, whole and entire, the shadow or death parts in me and outside me and I am taken up into the life and suffering, the death and resurrection of God and in faith participate in the fullness of God.

See then what a difference this can make to our relationships with others, to the reality of our relationships with our fellow human beings. Instead of screaming out our pathological fears at them like some extremist protest group; instead of standing in judgment and condemnation on the AIDS victim; instead of making ladders of sin in which we stand in the middle looking up occasionally and wistfully at the blessed saints above but more usually and disdainfully at the disreputable sinners below; we can accept the truth that we fail, admit the shams and pretences and the lying and the pride and also the shabby sins too. We can accept that much failure comes

from not knowing how to love well and we can then relax, cease to exhort others to be good like us (which usually fails anyway) and instead of a cold moralism extend the warm hand of a forgiving and crucified God within ourselves. We can let laughter and tears well up from our being and replace judgmentalism and separation with compassion. We can shake away the fear and become warm and loving. We can, as people who are like Jesus, living and bearing our own and others' guilt and sorrow, cry out to our fellow men and women across political frontiers, across race frontiers, across sexual frontiers, across religious frontiers, "Father forgive – today you shall be with me."