

Second Sunday of Easter 2019

Every budding Infantry officer has at least two books on their shelves: Clausewitz 'On war' and Sun Tzu 'The Art of War!' And from Sun Tzu we hear the dictum 'Know thine enemy!' It was in this spirit that someone gave me a copy of Alain de Botton's book *Religion for Atheists*. It's a good book with chapters on Community, Kindness, Education, Art; all good things in themselves. But ultimately I was left intellectually malnourished. What of creation, redemption and sanctification what have our atheist friends to say about these things...the meaning of life?

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come! John the Divine's greeting to the Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation. A greeting in name of the God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, the Triune God in whom is all our meaning and hope. The problem is with our doctrine of God is the tendency to separate past present and future, we who are bound by space and time, but for God...? St. Augustine conveyed a sense of this when he wrote that "Surely God created heaven and earth not *in* time, but together *with* time."

The doctrine of creation and new creation remains central to Christian faith. The Biblical accounts in the Book of Genesis for over a millennia and a half were read as literal accounts of our beginnings. But rather than unravelling with the advent of Biblical criticism and the work of Darwin, our thinking about creation was given new impetus. And with such theories as the Big Bang we began to consider that there was indeed an initial moment, a moment that created the perfect environment from life to begin and from there to evolve and to thrive. Creation, New Creation, our very lives, this is God! This is the wellspring of our hope!

Today we meet Thomas not really a hopeful character; perhaps something of a realist, even a fatalist. When Jesus heads off to Bethany to the tomb of Lazarus the disciples warn him, last time you were there they tried to stone you! Thomas, it seems, shrugs his shoulders and says 'let's go that we may all die!' So it's not surprising that he reacts the way he does on the hearing the news of the resurrection. Many have a soft spot for Thomas. His 'I'll believe that when I see' is something many can sympathise with. For us, well we have to comfort each other with Jesus' benediction: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' Although we have not seen, it is true, we have, unlike Thomas witnessed the birth and the growth of the Church throughout the world, evidence indeed of the resurrection. This is why during the Easter season we don't hear much from the Hebrew Scriptures we turn instead to the Book of the Acts of the Apostles; we hear about the birth of the Church, the Body of Christ.

The passage that we heard this morning from Acts is an interesting one in its context. The disciples have been put in prison, we are told because the authorities are jealous of them! During the night they are miraculously

released and told by an angelic messenger to go back to the temple and get on with the job of teaching and healing. Come morning the Sanhedrin gathers and waits for them to be brought before them, but they can't be found. They are discovered in the temple and brought before the council, which is where our readings picks up. The Sanhedrin did not know their enemy! They failed to understand that an initial moment had occurred, a moment that created the perfect environment from which new life was to begin and from there to evolve and to thrive. The apostles could do nothing but proclaim it! So what happened next in this narrative?

Paul who is still Saul is not on the scene at this time in the story, he is busily preparing to persecute the members of this new and growing sect. But his teacher and mentor is. We read: *a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time.* ³⁵*Then he said to them, 'Fellow-Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men...' He ends his speech: 'I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!'*

Their undertaking was not of human origin we are proof of that! This has become known as the Gamaliel principle; and it helps us in our thinking about this God, who is and who was and who is to come! Rather than endlessly inquiring into the historical nature of the creation and new creation as so many do, and which ultimately will not achieve anything, the Gamaliel principle tells us that creation and new creation depends on the consequent events that transpire in the future. The physicists and mathematicians have adopted the Gamaliel principle. They describe Chaos theory as 'the behavior of dynamical systems that are highly sensitive to initial conditions.' The resurrection for us are those initial conditions to which we, the Church, are highly sensitive to! We are the dynamical system! Someone once said that the resurrection was never something you could plan for! Someone else once said 'the future is not what it was!' We don't know what this future looks like that we are opening ourselves up to, but we need to be open to it with hope. Resurrection faith is all about allowing space for the God who raised Jesus to emerge as a God who creates a future. Sometimes it may be difficult to understand, it calls us to be patient and to be careful, mindful but above all hopeful.

Living the resurrection faith is what Christianity is at its heart. It is difficult from time to time. We are called to be open to the Spirit which the risen Jesus unleashed as he breathed on the disciples. This spirit may call us to what Stephen Cherry calls 'distasteful empathy;' coming alongside those folk we would much rather ignore. The Sanhedrin would have happily ignored those apostles but Gamaliel warned them that they *may even be found fighting against God!* What of us?

The whole history of Christianity (from our present point of view) stands as a remarkable example of how events can be imbued with meaning and significance not just by initial conditions as our scientists might call the resurrection but by all that has happened since and all that is hoped for! 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. Jesus is indeed our past, our present and our future hope, they are one, and this is our resurrection faith. Christ is risen...he is risen indeed. Amen.