

Christ the King 2020

At a funeral I conducted recently I was introduced to the poetry of the late John O'Donohue in particular a piece simply called 'Blessing.'

One of the stanzas read:

*May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
may the clarity of light be yours,
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.
And so may a slow
wind work these words
of love around you,
an invisible cloak
to mind your life.*

I compared this contemporary piece and its ancient Celtic overtones with Robert Browning's Victorian poem 'Year's at the spring.'

*The year's at the spring.
And the day's at the morn.
Mornings at seven;
The hillside dew pearled,
The larks on the wing;
The snails on the thorn;
God's in his heaven -
And all's right with the world.*

We can I think in these two pieces see a very different understanding of God. Both have poetic merit in their own way but the Victorian notion of God which held sway for many generations has become increasingly problematic. To us in this generation, a more cynical one perhaps, if we care to look around us, we will see that quite clearly everything is not all right with the world. And so therefore it is, I think, legitimate to ask - is God in heaven?

What is disturbing is that either God is not in heaven or given the state of the world he is not the kind of God we are told he is. Many clever answers have been given to this question and as mature Christians in a modern world we have to make this our own question. How do we make sense of the absolute compassion and love of God amid the horrendous pain that is rampant in our world?

The crux of the problem is that if as most people believe, God is in command and is in control of everything, the very existence of personal pain, not to mention the suffering of countless millions of people, raises

serious problems. On the one hand it is important for us to believe that God is in control, but on the other if he is, why, why doesn't he do something. I am reminded of a comment 'think of the millions of prayers that went up to God from those cattle trucks on the way to the gas chambers.'

The problem is compounded by the fact that we believe that God does intervene, the fact that we are here this morning, is for me evidence that God is working in our lives. So why doesn't God intervene in the horrors that are so apparent in our world? It is a smug form of Christianity that can believe one and not question the other.

Behind all the questions lies the basic problem of what we mean by power. If God is, as we heard in our readings this morning, 'almighty', 'the ruler of the Kings of the earth', the normal understanding of such power, is *control*, in other words the ability to make or prevent things happening. If we have this 'control' definition of power there follows a whole load of other questions about God.

Needless to say whatever I hoping to do this morning it does attempt to answer these questions. All I can hope to do is to give you the hints and hunches that have helped me live with these questions which are in the end unanswerable, beyond our understanding. But as we are celebrating the Feast of Christ the King it seems like an appropriate occasion to share these thoughts.

The symbolism of power has become heavily associated with control. And in recent times the notion has become hugely tainted, whether it is political power, commercial or economic power or dare I say power in the church. Repeatedly the evidence is that power seen as control corrupts absolutely. Karl Barth the great German theologian once wrote 'absolute power is of the devil.' So if this feast of Christ the King is celebrating a God who has absolute control, then we are celebrating bad news, or a lie.

So where might we find clues to the mystery of this feast? We are each of us made in the image of God and so therefore maybe our own experiences as images of the divine could help us. Very simply, but very profoundly we should all have discovered by now in our relationships with others that when *control* enters into it, the relationship is in great danger. Any parent or any lover of another person will know that the temptation is always there. Of course often we control with the best motives. The very young need to be controlled to prevent them from harming themselves. But as children grow then the temptation to continue to control is something that every parent will struggle with to some extent. There is also the temptation to control to prevent the one we love hurting *us*. And sometimes we need to allow people the space to grow, to make mistakes, even to go away despite the hurt it may cause. So our human experience suggests that control kills, it destroys the very resources needed for life in its fullest.

We must always resist the temptation to manipulate, we may think that we know best, but we do not always know the full story. There is also a temptation to attempt to control those set in authority over us, to try and undermine or control that authority.

So if we as images of the divine know through experience that love cannot entertain control then it is a hint, a hunch that points in the direction of how divine love operates towards us.

God is *not*, as most people are taught to believe 'in control' of everything! Because God loves us passionately and unconditionally – we experience this love in the life of Christ. In Christ we experience the divine, dispossessing himself, giving up control. Think what was the first thing that Jesus did before commencing his ministry – he wrestled with his temptations in the wilderness, and what was the devil offering him...control. We see this giving up control this morning...Christ is the one who is hungry, naked and in prison.

This kind of loving, seen in Jesus, and also in our own experience is being *with* those that we love and with those we find difficult to love in whatever, *whatever* happens. This kind of loving in each and every situation draws from somewhere within a person the hope and the possibility of transformation. However horrendous, unspeakable, the situation, nothing is beyond the power of God to transform from within through love. God is not distant 'in heaven' but is bringing heaven to earth minding our lives.

There is no place where this is demonstrated more explicitly than on the cross. The real meaning of today's feast is not glittering thrones, and the power of some unseen God, it is the devastated and disfigured person on the cross. The symbol of degradation and marginalisation, becomes, through the transforming power of love the true throne of glory. Here is the sign and hope of final victory over all evil, pain, suffering and death...and as always with the God, the truth is where you least expect to find it...in the bloody mess of the cross.