

5th July 2015

Jenny and I belong to a discussion group that meets every six weeks or so. Our debates are usually pretty rambling, and we never come to any particular conclusions, but I find that my understanding is usually deepened and my opinions often challenged. At our last get-together we were talking about Islam and Christianity. Our leader began by asking us to look at a picture of Jesus on the Cross. He explained that a Christian and a Muslim would respond very differently to this image. A Christian would see the triumph of love, and, hopefully, would respond in devotion and thanksgiving, but a Muslim would think it was impossible for God to allow his Messiah to suffer so humiliating a fate. Muslims do not accept that Jesus died on the cross, because they believe God would have intervened to save him.

These two responses reveal very different ideas about the nature of God. For Christians, God is supremely revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. In him we see God made manifest, so the crucifixion of Jesus shows us something particularly important about God's nature. W.H. Vanstone expresses it well in his poem "Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense". He begins by describing the nature of love:

Love that gives, gives ever more,
gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
ventures all, its all expends.

Therefore he who shows us God
helpless hangs upon the tree;
and the nails and crown of thorns
tell of what God's love must be

Here is God: no monarch he,
throned in easy state to reign;
here is God, whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.

The image of God that Jesus reveals is of vulnerable, suffering Love. The contrast between this and the way Islam understands God's nature, reminds us how extraordinary this is. The life and death of Jesus shows us that God does not stand apart from us, but enters into the woof and warp of our lives, transforming and renewing. So although at times we may feel hurt and disappointed and afraid, and life can occasionally appear tragic and meaningless, we nevertheless can have confidence that the God who raised Jesus, can bring new life and hope through the worst that the world can do. We believe and trust this because God has revealed himself in Jesus, and shows us that, despite appearances, his love is never finally defeated. In Vanstone's words, the world is sustained by God's arms of love that are stretched out for us on the cross.

This experience of God's love is vividly expressed by St Paul in our second reading this-morning. It's not the clearest passage that he ever wrote, and that's because he's trying to put into words an intimate personal experience that transformed him. Whatever it was that he suffered from, the answer to his prayer for relief was: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". In this passage, St Paul is telling us that the cross of Jesus can be played out within our own lives as we learn to trust God in those times when we feel failures - powerless, hurt and vulnerable.

This is such a counter-intuitive suggestion that we need continually to be reminding ourselves how important it is. It's not when we feel on top of the world that we are likely to be most open to God's influence in our lives; it's when we are at our most vulnerable, reflecting the nature of a God whose Son's arms, stretched out on the cross, sustain the world. So it's a matter of learning to live hopefully through these costly times, trusting in the power of God to work in us and through us in whatever way he wants. R.S.Thomas expresses it beautifully:

When we are weak, we are
strong. When our eyes close
on the world, then somewhere
within us the bush

burns. When we are poor
and aware of the inadequacy
of our table, it is to that
uninvited the guest comes.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. The world around provides us with many images of power. There’s dictatorial power, like Putin’s. Or there’s ideological power like Isis is attempting to impose. There’s arrogant power, like some bankers have been guilty of recently. There’s power that relies on status, on hero-worship, on money. There are those who use power to benefit their own family or interest group, and there are those who exercise power by manipulation. There is secret power, and power that refuses to be accountable. But if you want an understanding of power that is credible and that is true to the way the world works, then you don’t have to go further than the person of Jesus, who washed the disciple’s feet, agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, and hung upon the cross. The Christian Gospel provides the most compelling picture of power available to us, because it’s all about the power of love. True power, power that lasts, power that can transform and renew our lives and encourage human flourishing, is revealed in loving service and made perfect in weakness. Christians see the power of God embodied in the human life and, above all, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. By grace, we can know this power in our own lives as he lives in us and we live in him. This is a very different understanding of power than the world generally practices, and that’s one of the reasons why things so often go wrong, both in personal relations, and in the worlds of industry and commerce, politics and international relationships.

I began by contrasting the Christian and the Muslim understandings of the nature of God. I did so, not so much to emphasise the differences between us, as to illuminate the Christian conviction that God reveals himself to us in Jesus not in terms of worldly power or success, but in terms of vulnerable, suffering Love. What this tells us is that God is not remote, removed from our human emotions of yearning, anger, tenderness or fear. In Islam, the Word of God is revealed in the words of the Koran, but in Christianity the Word of God is revealed as a Person who is at every point like

us, who feels, who suffers, as we do. This implies that God is relational, meeting us in our relationships with one another, in our experiences of life, in the ups and downs of our human history. The more we learn to trust him with our vulnerabilities and our fears, our pains and our griefs, the more we discover the resources within ourselves that are gifts of his grace - compassion, courage, imagination, forgiveness, perseverance, hope. And, just as importantly, we begin to take on board the obligation to work on behalf of the weakest and the most vulnerable, as well as learning to critique the ways in which power is exercised in the world around us. Our lives are not primarily about being successful, or victorious, or wealthy or important, but are much more about developing attitudes of loving service, gratitude and generosity of spirit. These are the qualities that really make a difference, and are some of the fruits of God's grace.

Let St Paul have the last word:

“Take to heart among yourselves what you find in Christ Jesus. He was in the form of God; yet he made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. He was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross! Therefore God raised him to the heights, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow...So you too my friends must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed”. May God work in each one of us as we allow his power to be made perfect in our weaknesses.