

Remembrance Sunday confronts us with difficult questions about God

Ann and I were in the Troodos mountains in Cyprus in the summer. In the exhibition centre near one of the summits there were all sorts of displays and charts which show how the mountains were formed.

The recognition that life originated 15 billion years ago, and that creation has been evolving ever since is for me truly remarkable and awe inspiring. Looking at the wonder of the natural world many people find it difficult not to be drawn to the conclusion that there is a creator God, a divine artist, an unmoved first-mover...this is called teleology; the argument from design...one of Aquinas's five proofs for the existence of God.

Then, by contrast, I was listening to Simon Schama, the historian, on the radio this week. He asserted that in America over 90% of people believe evolution to be just a quirky theory, preferring the literal creationist "6 days work and a day off" idea. Many of these folk will take literally the Biblical stories and assert that creation happened about 5,000 years ago.

I am not disputing a person's right to believe creation came about in such a way but if I was a worrier, this would worry me!

Charles Darwin and what he stood for have been vilified by many who see him as somebody who attacked faith, and believe that if we allow that some form of evolution might have taken place, then our faith is in vain.

Of course Darwin gets terribly misrepresented. Darwin was somebody who did not take pleasure in arguing with the idea of God. As Owen Chadwick remarked, rather than being the pugnacious heretic, Darwin was "a direct, humble and reverent seeker after truth". It has to be remembered that his wife had a committed faith and Darwin did not consider himself to be an atheist..

Where am I going with this on Remembrance Sunday?

Darwin struggled with belief like all of us do from time to time. Evolution theory per se did not cause him to question his faith in God. It was not his academic greatness which led him to question his faith but his experience and his emotional.

It was not cerebral thoughts of how things came to be, but rather the death of his beloved daughter Annie at the age of 10 which had a profoundly negative effect upon his religious views. He simply could not countenance the fact that "God" had intended this to happen or let it happen.

And yet even when his daughter Annie died in Malvern, where Darwin had taken her in the hope of finding a cure for her, he wrote a touching letter to his wife which is astounding in what it reveals about him:

'My dear dearest Emma, I pray God Fanny's note may have prepared you. [Annie] went to her final sleep most tranquilly, most sweetly at twelve o'clock today. Our poor dear child has had a very short life but I trust happy, and God only knows what miseries might have been in store for her - God bless her. We must be more and more to each other, my dear wife.'

Darwin even in the face of huge loss did not doubt that God existed but

perhaps like us questioned how God operates.

Today Remembrance Sunday for many has that tinge about it in the enormity of suffering and loss which surrounds war. And Remembrance Sunday is one of those days when we turn our thoughts amongst all the other themes of today as to where God is in all the enormities of world wars and the resultant suffering and pain.

In reflecting on war today, looking into the face of evil and suffering challenges our faith in God.

The presence of evil forces us to questions...

A Jewish survivor of Treblinka told how the Nazi's kept a squad of Jewish slaves to clear out the gas chambers and bury the bodies. The Jewish prisoners had to open the doors of the gas chambers and drag the bodies to the grave. He said that sometimes they found living children, still alive, clinging to their mothers. They were forced to strangle them before throwing them into the grave. People who visit Auschwitz say that the thing that most shatters them is the pile of children's shoes. To many who have written about the Holocaust, Jews and non Jews, the questioning of God is not about his existence but about how he acts...

Some suffering is human in origin and we all need to know that there are consequences of our actions. We make choices and those choices can be good or bad. But, ultimately no answer is given for the great sufferings, many caused through natural disasters like earthquakes, or armed conflict over which we have little or no control, only the realisation that we have to learn to live with the mystery of suffering and continue to trust in God.

We might all shout at God asking why he allows it. But ultimately the question is what are we going to do after the shouting has stopped? . . (repeat)

In one of the great texts of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel describes the execution by hanging of a young boy in one of the concentration camps. He tells us that the boy twitched in his death throes on the end of the rope, a voice was heard crying out 'Where is God now' To which came back the answer 'God is there; hanging on the gallows'

God so identifies with us in our sorrows that God dies our deaths and suffers our pains.

So for many people ideas about God have to be challenged. It is not defensible to believe in a loving, omnipotent God who then sits and observes impassively.

The only God who can be worshipped is a God who suffers with us. At the heart of our faith as Christians lies the fact that Jesus of Nazareth, who reveals God to us, dies. The crucifixion of Jesus rescues us from naïve optimism because it identifies God with our pain and suffering once and for all.

The death of Jesus shows God bearing the pain most visibly, God suffers. There is no easy way out, no legions of angels flying to the rescue. God like us suffers. Like us when faced with unbearable grief, Jesus shouts 'why me'...

'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me'

Yes we have pain, yes we have doubt. We are confronted all around us by evil, but so too are we faced daily by goodness. There are great saints as well as appalling sinners. The great love that we know in others is a love which finds its source not in a meaningless universe, the result of an accident, but in a God who is its author and

its essence.

Conclusion

We do not have the answers to the suffering and pain in the world. We do not have the answer to why evil seems so prevalent in war, drawn out of the worst side of human nature. But the death of Christ shows us that the idea of a God who watches impassively is wrong. We do not know why God allows suffering, we do not know why God allows the totally inhuman atrocities of an Auschwitz or a Treblinka. But we do know that it hurts God as much as it hurts us. A love that leaves the lover unaffected by the joys and suffering of the one who is loved is not love at all. A lot of this is expressed in the hymn God is Love: let heav'n adore him. I leave you with the second verse. The Precentor often reads the text of hymns!

God is Love: and he enfoldeth

all the world in one embrace;

with unfailing grasp he holdeth

every child of every race.

And when human hearts are breaking

under sorrow's iron rod,

then they find that selfsame aching

deep within the heart of God.

Amen.