

Pain in an Angel

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"Pain is a holy angel which shows treasure to man which otherwise remains forever hidden." Adalbert Stifter

In the chapel of Gethsemane in Coventry Cathedral there is a stained-glass window depicting an angel bearing a chalice: the cup of suffering which Christ so dreaded that he prayed that it should be taken from him, and then drank to the bitter dregs for the salvation of us all. Angel, from the Greek *Aggelos*, means 'messenger' and in both Old and New Testaments these spiritual beings appear in moments of special communication between God and man. Whether or not we believe in the existence of angels is of no consequence here, for we are looking beyond words and images at a truth which is central to our understanding of Christianity: the truth that God reveals himself to man.

Theologians speak of revelation as God's self-communication and it is understood that, as between people, there can be no communication unless the person 'spoken' to is ready and open to receive the message. Man's reception of the divine message depends not, as we might suppose, upon the whim of the Almighty choosing or not choosing to show himself, but upon man's having eyes to see and ears to hear his Word that is being constantly proclaimed.

When I began to study theology a few years ago, I despaired of understanding a discipline that appeared to me so vague that it continually eluded my anxious grasp. Then, as the months passed, and I puzzled over pieces of apparently unrelated information like a child with a grown-up's jigsaw, a pattern began to emerge. Little by little, as happens to the patient jigsaw artist, I found ideas and concepts that fitted together and I began to realize that my puzzle was so difficult precisely because the picture it was building up was so simple. Examined separately the pieces were curious shapes and had no meaning: fitted together they merged into one another to make a design of such beauty that I am still reeling from the impact, although the unfinished picture remains spread out upon my table.

One of my first 'pieces' in this puzzle was "Word". St John's Gospel tells us that:

'In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God'. John 1:1.

'The Word' means God: but we do not stop here. Precisely because in this life we cannot know God, the way we speak about him is correspondingly imprecise. One word has many meanings and the same idea is contained in many words. Our language about God is essentially a language of symbols and images and is closer to the language of poetry and lovers than that of scientists.

So "Word" is used to represent God himself, but it is also used to speak of his communication to us: of all the different and marvellous ways in which he tells us about himself and of his love for us. The psalmist tells us that God is revealing himself to us in our world each minute of our day and night:

'The heavens proclaim the glory of God
and the firmament shows forth the work of his hands.
Day unto day takes up the story
and night unto night makes known the message. Psalm 18

This power of 'seeing' God in the things of nature is given to many men, but it seems to be bestowed in a special way upon poets and mystics and produces a childlike sense of wonder that is each day's new gift. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, living in an England in the throes of the Industrial Revolution saw:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries, . . .

[from *Aurora Leigh*: Book I]

"Only he who sees takes off his shoes". There's the catch — how do we learn to see, attune our ears to the Word that is forever written, spoken, sung before unseeing eyes, unhearing ears.

Annie Dillard, the young American Pulitzer prize-winner, herself gifted with a wondrous sense of the presence of God in her world, writes:

"The secret of seeing is, then, the pearl of great price. If I thought he could teach me to find it and keep it forever I would stagger barefoot across a hundred deserts after any lunatic at all". [Annie Dillard *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*]

Where, then, are we to look for this pearl of great price?

"But although the pearl may be found it may not be sought. The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, even to the most practised and adept, a gift and a total surprise." [Dillard *ibid.*]

If we may not look then, where must we wait, in what attitude of alertness or expectancy must we stand if we are not, like the foolish virgins, to miss the bridegroom's coming?

"I cannot cause light, the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam. It is possible, in deep space, to sail on solar wind. Light, be it particle or wave, has force: you rig a giant sail and go. The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit until you are yourself a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff." [Dillard *ibid.*]

It has taken me many years to learn the necessity for honing the spirit: that a condition of complete simplicity will cost me not less than everything. This is the lesson that each man and woman must learn for himself: and go on learning and re-learning because it is always forgotten.

For me, the experience of imprisonment was a special time of learning, for, stripped of all I possessed and nearly of my life, my spirit was forcibly honed so that in my nakedness I became terrifyingly, marvellously vulnerable to the solar wind.

Just as my experience of suffering and loss revealed to me many things about the gift of life and goods that I would probably never have learned otherwise, so pain and grief can be for many people the occasion of an encounter with God. It is perhaps only after we have been temporarily disabled that we come to value our power to move, and only after a period of darkness that we can gaze in wonder upon what the light reveals. The thesis that pain and darkness are inescapable features of the road to the vision of God is inextricably woven into the scriptures and the writings of saints and mystics. Perhaps nowhere more powerfully is this stated than in this rendering by T S Eliot of a famous passage from St John of the Cross:

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.

When we live in constant sunshine we take the warmth of the sun for granted. It is only when we are plunged into blackness that we can begin to grasp the glory of the constant illumination of our lives and hence to be grateful for the gift of light. In St John's gospel, as elsewhere in the scriptures, "Word" is interchangeable with "Light":

All that came to be had life in him

and that life was the light of men,
a light that shines in the dark,
a light that darkness could not overpower. John 1:4.

For the psalmist, as always, there is no problem of dividing lines and images flow one into the other like water colours under the artist's brush:

Your word is a lamp for my steps
and a light for my path. Psalm 118

The Word of God *is* God; he who is the light of our dark way is also The Way, The Truth and The Life.

I think that the greatest lesson that I learned from my time in prison is what has been called "the essential givenness of things" (Thomas Cullinan: *The Survival Handbook*). Like most young adults I had always taken for granted my health of mind and body, and although I would never have articulated it, I somehow believed that this wholeness of person was not only my right but the natural reward of my own hard work and clean living. Unashamedly proud of my gifts of personality, intelligence and general capability I had never questioned from whence they came or considered that they might be taken from me. If this self-caricature seems harshly drawn it is because I am at pains to make clear the distinction between knowledge at the level of the Intellect and at the level of experience; what we can call rather crudely the gut level. I see this distinction as enormously important because it is only when we "know" something at this deep level of our being that it moves us to act. Revelation, God's self-communication must be received not only in the Intellect but in the depths of our person if it is to take root in us, to bring about a change of heart. Just as the people of Israel became aware in retrospect of the presence of God in their lives, so we too may come to recognize Him in the events that happen to us. Like Jacob we wake from sleep to say "The Lord is in this place and I never knew it". (Genesis 32:30). We recognize that it is the Word, alive and active that has cut us so finely, slipping into those carefully guarded places between the soul and the spirit. But it is important that we understand that this apprehension of God in events is nearly always a retrospective phenomenon. In my experience pain and suffering almost inevitably take us by surprise. My own arrest and torture were totally unexpected, just as a car accident, an incurable illness or a sudden bereavement, however intellectually predictable, is always an emotional thunderbolt. At the time we experience only pain, impotence and fear; the appalling proximity of the Cross makes it impossible to discern its shape, to recognize it, and we feel only the crushing weight, only the blackness of the wood as we fall under its weight. This is the agony of Gethsemane. Jesus, the man wept

as He felt His Passion approach, as the hideous folly of it all became blindingly clear, and the redemptive pattern of His suffering had not yet emerged.

The violence of my arrest and subsequent treatment rendered me completely powerless, and in the weeks which followed, I came to know “in carne propria”, in my own flesh, the sufferings of intolerable pain, of aloneness, of captivity, of hunger and cold and, worst of all, of fear. At the time my sense of God’s presence was largely obscured by the weight of this Cross, and it was only with the passage of time that I was able to appreciate the quality of revelation, of gift, of message in what had happened to me. Realization came very slowly, like the gradual fading of the blackness of night into the greyness of early morning. It began when I was moved from the Interrogation Centre to a block of solitary confinement cells. Separated by a few miles from the place where I had been tortured I allowed myself once again to hope. It was not that I had ever despaired but that I had lived, existed, in a sort of limbo of terror and uncertainty in which to think of freedom was to allow a crack in some vital and primitive defence mechanism. Now, sitting alone on my bunk I made a conscious effort to pray, and it was in struggling to articulate my deep sense of relief that the immensity of God’s gift was borne upon me. To have been utterly helpless in the hands of men who had become accustomed to kill and yet to have been spared brought home to me the simplest of all truths – that my life was pure gift. How can I convey what this meant and still means to me? To feel the wind in my hair, the sand on the dunes under my bare feet, the warmth of a friend’s hand in mine. I am a crazy multifaceted diamond and I touch creation and creatures, and through them my Creator in a hundred different and wonderful ways. A glimpse through the bars of the first light coming up behind the mountains beyond the ten foot wall outside my cell was each morning new joy, just as the way the lollipop sun fell into the sea last night and made my pulse race and my heart swell with joy. Perhaps it is this sense of wonder which is the pearl of great price for which a man will leave home, oxen and land. A man cannot buy the lens that will permit him to see heaven in a wild flower – it is God’s free gift to the pure in heart.

In the sermon on the Mount, Christ tells His disciples that it is the pure in heart who will see God. This is the purity of heart that comes to those who learn not to desire worthless things, not to make unto themselves graven images, and not to trample upon the poor and the orphaned. It is singleness of heart that comes from learning the one thing necessary – to love the Lord our God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves. This is the Good

News, the Word of the Lord, spoken by the prophets and then lived out by the Word who dwelt among us. It is a message so simple that we fail to see it – because it demands not less than everything. Unable to face these demands we rephrase them and make for ourselves images of the God we cannot see, because our hearts are not pure. We fashion for ourselves an idol of a polite, well-bred God who understands that we are busy people with little time to pray and a position to maintain in society. Ours is a white Anglo-Saxon God who understands very well that we cannot be our brother's keeper and that we sympathise deeply with the oppressed and the hungry although their problems are no concern of ours. Ours is a God well pleased with burnt offerings, by a half-hour of our time on Sunday and a tithe of a tithe of our wealth. But is this the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Is this the God of the prophet Isaiah?

“What are your endless sacrifices to me?
says Jahweh.
I am sick of the holocausts of rams
and the fat of calves . . .
Bring me your worthless offerings no more,
the smoke of them fills me with disgust.

You may multiply your prayers
I shall not listen.
Your hands are covered with blood,
wash, make yourselves clean.

Take your wrongdoing out of my sight,
Cease to do evil.
Learn to do good,
search for Justice,
help the oppressed,
be just to the orphan,
plead for the widow.

Isaiah I : 11-17

Do we perhaps forget that the God of our fathers was one God of the oppressed, of the poor, of the powerless? Could it be that we are meant to take the Sermon on the Mount literally: that we shall be most blessed when poor, homeless, mourning and persecuted, because it is only then that we shall be in a fit condition to see God?

The very first command of the Lord to His people “I am the Lord your God, you shall have no strange gods before Me” is one that we would do well to re-examine. Do we fancy that because we have no golden calf that we have abandoned the worship of idols? Do we not recognize that our quest for comfort, pleasure, prestige

and security are in reality the pursuit of a false God? The God of our fathers made a Covenant with His people and promised to be with them – on one condition:

“If you do amend your behaviour and your actions, if you treat each other fairly, if you do not exploit the stranger, the orphan and the widow, (and if you do not shed innocent blood in this place), and if you do not follow alien gods to your own ruin, then, here in this place I will stay with you, in the land that long ago I gave to your fathers for ever” .

[Jer. 7: 5 - 7].

Can it be that the Holy Angel sweeps into our sanctuaries, upsets our altars and shatters our idols, not to destroy all that is dear to us, but so that, when the clouds of incense from the upturned thuribles has cleared away we may look upon the face of the living God? But of course, we are no better than our ancestors. The vision of God is so beautiful, so terrible that we cannot bear it and we cover our faces for fear that we shall become blind. And yet, if we are lucky, if the destroying angel razes our house to the ground, we may, with God’s grace, open our eyes to see. Then we shall be able to see Him everywhere, in the felon, and the leper no less than in the wild flower, in the terror of the storm no less than in the stillness of a mountain lake. Our vision will ever be imperfect but we shall see as in a glass darkly that the power of a God who destroys a thousand people in an earthquake is no less wonderful than the gentleness with which He gives a new born child into the arms of his mother.

Then indeed shall our mourning be changed into joy that no one can take away from us. The Angel’s message is the revelation of God Himself: the message heard and received is the gift of faith, and faith in God is nothing less than life and love and laughter: a fullness of being that opens us up to the sun, the moon, the sea, and the stars, the Universe with which we are incredibly, gloriously one.