Service of Dedication

January 2009

Leader's Address

This is a sermon about the anguish of our world and its relationship with reconciliation. It has its origin in a dialogue between Simon Jenkins, a columnist in the Guardian, and an atheist, and Richard Harries, former Anglican Bishop of Oxford. In the dialogue Jenkins accuses Harries of being 'a vaguely agnostic bishop'. Harries responds in a confession of not-knowing (agnosticism) and a confession of faith. This is the quotation:

> I am a definite agnostic in the sense of St John of Damascus who said that what God is 'in his essence and nature is absolutely unknowable'. And a definite believer in that the only faith I can live with in a world of such anguish is a God, who is at once crucified and risen.

I don't want to focus on Harries' confession of not-knowing but on his words 'in a world of such anguish', and how they relate to a God 'who is at once crucified and risen'.

This is a world of anguish, filled with war as we see currently in Gaze, torture and cruelty and where millions of people die of malnutrition or lack of health care each year. We could mention the current situation in Zimbabwe and we can go on. And we often want to hide, completely understandably from this anguish. Our whole modern Western world often seems to be devoted to keeping it hidden. Our Northern Ireland Programme for Government has at the heart the prospect of prosperity and, therefore, the minimising of anguish. The Government's policy on victims in so far as it has one, is about the political management of anguish. And, of course, the political avoidance and management of anguish is not to be despised. It is partly what politics is about. And it has its dark side.

There is the out-there-ness of political and social reality but anguish often comes closer to home. Walter Schels is a photographer who photographs people before and after death. He photographed a woman whose mother had rejected her as a child and who struggled all her life for some acceptance. She felt that 'even life itself has rejected' her. In death her face is painfully broken and aged, expressing a silent scream of unspeakable pain and trauma. Before such realities we fall into silence. This unlovedness is hell.

At the centre of Christian faith is a cry of anguish

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus' cry of where is God in this is actually the start of any Christian account of reconciliation. Such an account starts in the apparent absence of God. Jesus forsaken is the God for our times. Abandoned, and in solidarity with the abandoned, God is in the bits and pieces of things, in the brokenness. The love of God has a name and a face: Christ crucified. As the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: only a suffering God would do. Biblical truth is a suffered truth, not a confessional statement.

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' is a direct quotation from Psalm 22. And many of the psalms give voice to profoundly angry people, who are expressing their anguish to God, who want justice and indeed revenge. They tear the veil that hides the anguish of the world. These voices are profoundly not nice and remind us that reconciliation and related work is often a place of uncomfortableness. Reconciliation is about the 'realness of things' (Ray Davey).

One of the most interesting Catholic renewal movements is Focolare which was started by Chiara Lubich, arising out of her experience in the Italian city of Trento – a city heavily bombed in 1944. Compare Ray's experiences in Dresden. She died last year.

Christ's forsakenness is a central part of Chiara Lubich's theology and she links it with a powerful yearning for unity, a unity which in her life and work moved beyond the Catholic Church to other Christian churches, and to people of other faiths, and it involved politics and economics. Unity is the overcoming of forsakenness and brokenness and the stepping over the boundaries in identification with the other, particularly with the stranger and the alien. Christ makes himself one with us (Phil 2: 7) in a process that culminates in his dereliction and the consequence is his cry of forsakenness. For Chiara Lubich unity is related to a centre – the forsaken Jesus, who is at one with us in all the forms that anguish takes in human existence for he accepted 'death, death on a cross. Therefore, she was driven – and we should follow her in this – to build bridges of understanding with others. Christ forsaken

paradoxically reveals the tenacity of God's dialogue with humanity. He will not give up. He will offer time and space. Only a relational God will do.

There is a dimension of reconciliation work which is about anguish.

- I have heard about in those who have listened to the stories of the victims of the Northern Ireland troubles

- I have heard about in those who have listened to the stores of some refugees and asylum seekers who have come to these shores

And all of you could go on. I saw the anguish in Ray's face at the death of Kathleen.

And, and, and…

The hope which we see in Jesus Christ will not be extinguished. He is the image – the icon – of the invisible God.

As Emily Dickinson said

> Hope is a thing with feathers
>
> That perches in the soul
>
> And sings the tune without words.
>
> And never stops – at all.

We are prisoners of hope.

Sometimes, precariously, fragilely, often not knowingly, we mediate a resurrection faith – a faith which is about piecing together broken fragments, and reclaiming a healed identity. We often cannot bring solutions, often there are no solutions. It may simply be about being there – in silence, attention, solidarity and gesture. We see

this in Jesus' silence and then a kiss in his encounter with the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*.

The resurrection of Christ transfigures – changes the appearance – of the world. The mystery of Christ's post-resurrection appearances, as gardener, stranger on the road, figure on the shore, point to a changed reality. Sometimes through us, not because of us, there is a changed reality.

As Christians we are not asked to sign up to a grand theology about how the world works including anguish and suffering – 'just to imagine that the world might have changed' (Rowan Williams).

The contemporary painter Ken Kiff has painted a water colour called 'Flower and Black Sky'. He shows a very bleak world indeed. The sky is the darkest black, and even the moon or sun is a clouded ball. In its occluded illumination we can make out a shrivelled tree, as stark as seaweed, and beside it a pale rock. In this arid world, a purple flower lifts up its leaves in a gesture of rejoicing. Its petals glow with radiant vitality: whatever else is dead here, this small bloom is joyfully and brightly alive. Love, in fact, cannot be extinguished. No black sky or dying trees can affect its inner radiance, its knowledge of another world coming into being.

Ray Davey, post the destruction and anguish of Dresden saw Easter fitting into 'the realness of things. Its tragedy darkness and sorrow' but 'also climbing up the other side into life and victory over death'. These words pull us into the reality of God's reconciling activity and call us, like Ray, to mend brokenness wherever we find it.

The love of the Father has a name and a face: Christ crucified. A deep paradox and yet a hopeful paradox. Amen.

David Stevens