

15 September 2018

Contingency (John 9: 1-7)
Season of Creation 3 (Pentecost XVII)
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Here's a quote to begin – it's from Rowan Williams, of course.

'The weightiest criticisms of Christian speech and practice amount to this: that ... it neglects or trivializes or evades aspects of the human'. Christians, he says, are 'notoriously awkward about sexuality'; we risk not taking death seriously enough when we speak too glibly and confidently about eternal life; and our theology 'can disguise the abiding reality of unhealed and meaningless suffering'. It's for this reason, Williams goes on, that some of those who are most concerned with living truthfully and compassionately reject Christian faith as something that tends to falsify and corrupt imagination.¹

As you know, we're in the midst of our Season of Creation. We're reflecting on what it means to understand the world as created – that is, to relate to what exists as intended, intelligible, a whole. The belief that's expressed again and again in the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures is that the manifold variety and diversity of things is part of a larger unity and connected to God's good purposes. The project of creation is the peaceable kingdom where 'the lion will lie down with the lamb'; its consummation is that state of blessedness where every tear will be wiped away, 'death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more' (Rev. 21: 4). Inside this overarching vision of coherence and promised harmony, we and all that lives have our place. The trick is to get with the program – to discover and live out our part in the divine plan.

Well, on a good day, this feels resonant and, on a very good day, even possible. But if we're honest, much of the time this vision does indeed seem to

¹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.39-40.

‘neglect or trivialise or evade’ the reality of our experience and our awareness of the possibility, the *facts* of ‘tragic loss, [and] senseless, inexplicable, unjustifiable, unassimilable pain’.² In this world, shit happens. You only have to think of those born blind or born in detention on Nauru; of those who die young or violently or because of some utterly random, absurd misfortune. There’s the extinction of species and the crushing experience of natural disaster; there’s genocide, slavery, chronic pain and life-crippling experiences of abuse. How’s any of that part of the plan? How’s any of that to be rendered into a meaningful whole?

Iris Murdoch says that whenever we tell a story that seeks to resolve or explain such contingencies, or make them serve some higher, larger, albeit hidden purpose, then we’re attempting to conceal from ourselves that human life is ‘intolerably chancy and incomplete’.³ But it is, chancy and incomplete. And that means, she maintains, that although there are patterns and purposes *within* life, we have to say that ‘there is no general and ... externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search’.⁴ The only way to live truly, she thinks, is to face up to the unconsoled-ness, the pointlessness, contingency and transience of our lives and indeed of life itself.

This challenge to the Christian understanding of creation is, it seems to me, much deeper and more serious than the so-called ‘scientific’ objections posed in the science-religion debate. Those objections, as I argued a couple of weeks ago, mistake the nature of the Scriptural narrative whose point is not to supply information about the physical processes of existence, so much as to express faith that existence itself is given by and in response to God’s call. But the kind of objection Murdoch raises does put in real question the faith that the world is given by an intentionality that’s ordered, purposeful and good. For how may we reconcile our lived experience of tragedy with the doctrine of creation? Is it possible to profess faith in the creative

² Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.155.

³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.87.

⁴ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p.79.

purposes of God without it becoming an evasion, a falsifying story we use to veil the terrors of night?

One possible theological 'move' at this point is to posit the 'fall' as the explanation for what's gone wrong – God created everything well but we've mucked it up. It's our 'sin' that's resulted in all the evils, both natural and moral, that blight life on earth. That's the move the disciples make: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (John 9: 2). But I don't buy it. I can certainly accept there's a degree of our having mucked it up – even many of our natural disasters aren't wholly 'natural' anymore. But clearly this doesn't account for everything. Not only are we randomly vulnerable to the tragic and unintended consequences of our own and others' actions, but contingency and disorder are now understood to be intrinsic to the very fabric and evolution of the world. The same processes that allow for the possibility of newness, emergence and growth allow also for the possibility of cancer, disabling genetic mutation and the like. So again, how are we to reconcile our lived experience of tragic contingency with the doctrine of a good creation?

Everything depends on our picture of God. There's a way of talking about God that is a projection of our own desire for control and security, that enables us to reconcile 'discontinuity into system', easily, glibly. It gives us the illusion of a 'God's-eye' view, and a way of talking that explains away pointless suffering as somehow 'necessary' after all, and therefore justified by the larger scheme – like when people say at the death of a child that 'God wanted her for an angel'. This God, Williams writes, 'is clearly an idol'.⁵ But the God who's revealed, who is come among us in the person of Jesus, isn't like this. What's encountered in these events is not some abstract, projected 'idea' of God, but the experience of God with us, the experience of God involved in the risk and sorrow of history, whose loving purposes aren't guaranteed in advance but wrought in costly self-giving – think of Gethsemane, the cross and the tomb. And if this is who and how God is, then it has significant implications also for our picture of 'creation'. It suggests that creation is not so much

⁵ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp.155-156.

a finished product whose coherence and harmony are built in from the beginning, and whose chanciness and suffering therefore have to be explained away; rather it's a world being wrought as God liberates creatures to be and to participate in its unfolding.

This sense of things seems borne out in the gospel of John, where Jesus is strikingly portrayed as continuing the work of creation because creation itself is unfinished. That's what all those healings on the Sabbath are about – the Sabbath is the day when God is said to rest from the labour of creating the world, but Jesus continues to work because it's not yet time to rest. So we find it written that when the authorities start persecuting him 'because he was doing such things on the Sabbath, Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working"' (5: 17). Likewise, tonight's story of healing the blind man is (in part) a story about creation being completed. Jesus tells his disciples 'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him' and he effects the healing by making mud from the dust of the earth and spreading it on the man's eyes, symbolically completing his creation from the dust out of which all human beings are made.

On this vision, the nature and promise of God is not that we'll be saved from chance, finitude, tragedy and thwarted purpose, but that creation will not be abandoned. God will not cease working for its completion and transformation from within. This grounds faith in the possibility of healing, wholeness, fulfilment, new life from death and despair. But it's not the same as saying it's all sorted in advance, that everything that happens is part of God's 'plan', or that there's no risk in the project itself. It's true that in the light of the resurrection, the deepest testimony of our faith is that the 'victory' is assured, that love triumphs over death, that 'all will be well and all manner of things will be well'. But this testimony is never simply true in the abstract – a consoling formula that allows us to evade the pain of existence. It's a truth we realise only as we stay close to the reality of suffering and grief, refusing to avoid or evade, until one day we may discover ourselves met and re-created by the same love that's the source of all that is and is coming to be.