

20 April 2019

**God in Safe Hands** (Luke 23: 50-56)

*Holy Saturday*

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In his Nazi prison cell in 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem. It's about the different ways Christians and pagans, believers and unbelievers, relate to 'God'. Everyone, he says in the first stanza, believers and unbelievers alike, go to God when they're in trouble, when they need help, peace, bread. You've heard the saying, there are no atheists in foxholes? It's the same idea – *in extremis*, Bonhoeffer says, almost everyone cries out for help. And God, he says in the final stanza, is available to everyone, believers or not, offering mercy, forgiven life for all without condition. So far, so conventional.

It's the second stanza that's the kicker. Because here Bonhoeffer contemplates what happens when it's *God* who is in trouble, when it's *God* who's 'poor, scorned, unsheltered, whelmed under weight of evil, weak or dead'. This is where the difference between Christian and pagan, believer and unbeliever, is really made out, for what's distinctive about people of faith, he says, is that they go to God when God is sorely placed, they stand by God in God's hour of grief. The way Bonhoeffer frames all this feels a little old-fashioned, even slightly cringe-worthy. But I believe there's something radical and deeply significant here too – something that goes to the heart of what's wrought in the world by the events of Easter. Tonight, as we gather at Christ's tomb, 'standing by God in God's hour of grief', I want to reflect a little on this theme.

Theologically speaking, Bonhoeffer is wrestling during this period of his life with what Christianity means in a 'world come of age'. No one buys, he insists, (or at least no one should buy) any longer, the idea of God as some super being, directing traffic from on high and intervening at will in the created order. This idea of divinity,

which Bonhoeffer thinks is idolatrous, a product of infantile ‘religiosity’, has been finally banished by secular modernity and good riddance to it. ‘Man’s religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world’, he says. But ‘the Bible directs [us] to God’s powerlessness and suffering’.<sup>1</sup> God on a cross, God in a tomb. And this has radical implications. Most especially, it means giving up fantasies of rescue, as if the role of God is to save us from suffering. For Bonhoeffer, the whole point of Christian faith is not to give us free passage through the world, but to make us capable of participating *with* God, as God, in the life of the world.

In a remarkably similar vein, the Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum, also imprisoned by the Nazis, lived her way into the same kind of vision. Like Bonhoeffer, she knows there’s no rescue on offer from some *deus ex machina* – like Bonhoeffer she will be killed before the end of the war. But writing from a transit camp on her way to Auschwitz, her letters witness to her profound and growing experience of the reality she comes to name ‘God’. God recognized, not by means of visions, voices, miraculous happenings, but by the calling forth in her of a particular responsiveness.

She speaks of God ‘ripening’ within her. Her writing reflects her growing sense of this ripening issuing forth in a vocation to hold space open for love, somehow taking responsibility for God being present, available in the midst of horror. The more fully she gives herself to prayer and to what she senses of this call, the more she finds herself capable even in these most harrowing circumstances of being profoundly non-anxious, forgiving, at peace. ‘You cannot help us’, she writes to God, ‘we must help You to help ourselves. [T]hat is all we manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves’.<sup>2</sup>

Commenting on this vision, Rowan Williams observes: ‘The religious life, on this account, [means] taking on the task of ensuring a habitation for God, a God who does not guarantee for himself a place in the created world ... and so is visible only when a human life gives place, offers hospitality to God, so that this place, this

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, new intro. Samuel Wells (London: SCM Press, 2017), p.134.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Rowan Williams, ‘Religious Lives’ in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012, p.318.

identity, becomes a testimony'.<sup>3</sup> As Etty writes, 'There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?' And remarkably, in a letter written just two months before she died, 'God is in safe hands with us despite everything'.<sup>4</sup>

Yesterday, we remembered Jesus handed over to be crucified. Today he is a corpse, utterly vulnerable to what may be done to him. No safe pair of hands, apparently, in Jerusalem. Today it seems that space for God in the human world has been shut definitively down. There's still no room at the inn.

But wait ... Here is someone standing by him. Joseph of Arimathea, a good and righteous man, has asked for Jesus' body. He's taken it down from the cross and wrapped it tenderly in a linen cloth, laid it in a tomb. And here are others ... Women disciples have followed faithfully to see where the body is laid, and are now preparing spices to anoint his battered flesh, once the Sabbath day is over. These are women who've been with Jesus from the very beginning, since Galilee. This is Joseph who's been waiting expectantly for years for the kingdom of God. Could it be that the life of God is even now taking fuller shape in theirs, being made visible once more in a hostile world, as they offer it place? And if that's how it is for them, what might it mean for us?

On Holy Saturday, we undergo the collapse of religious fantasy and our infantile longings for rescue from on high. Long before Nietzsche, our tradition proclaimed the death of that God. But the fate of the God of Jesus Christ, the God who suffers with and for us, and who seeks habitation, enfleshment within and among us – that's a different matter. As we gather at the tomb to witness and persist in waiting expectantly on him, responding faithfully to what we sense is some mysterious ripening within, perhaps we may even dare to hope that God is in safe hands with us too, despite everything.

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, 'Religious Lives', p.319.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Williams, 'Religious Lives', p.325.