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**Afflicted in Every Way (2 Corinthians 4. 7-12, 16-18)**

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When does paradox become contradiction? Sheer nonsense?

When theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that God wants us to live as if there were no God, the philosopher Iris Murdoch said she suspected he was misusing language. Would she have said the same of St Paul? 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ... struck down, but not destroyed'. For what do these words really mean? Could they be spoken in the face of those who really are afflicted in every way, struck down, given up to death? In the hearing of the mothers and fathers of Gaza clutching the bodies of their dead children? Of defenceless civilians fleeing their homes in Sudan and from the towns and villages of eastern Ukraine? Could they be spoken by or in the hearing of members of our own community who are forgotten, neglected, ill or abused? Are Paul's words merely cheap rhetoric? Metaphorically exciting, but practically useless and even worse than useless – falsifying, trivialising, culpably dissociated from the tragedy of existence?

Rowan Williams once said that 'the weightiest criticisms of Christian speech and practice amount to this: that [our] language actually fails to transform the world's meaning because it neglects or trivializes or evades aspects of the human. It is notoriously awkward about sexuality; it risks being unserious about death when it speaks too glibly and confidently about eternal life; it can disguise the abiding reality of unhealed and meaningless suffering'. For this reason, he continued, 'some of those most serious about the renewal of a moral discourse reject formal Christian commitment as something that would weaken or corrupt their imagination'.<sup>1</sup> These

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

are weighty criticisms indeed. On this Dark Night of the Season, in what seems to many a 'dark night' for our world, I believe we need to face them.

Let's start by looking again at what Paul writes to the community in Corinth. The background to this letter involves a history of factionalism in the Corinthian church, and dispute about the authority of various teachers. Paul has had to respond to questions about his own credentials to speak the truth of Jesus and of God. In his first letter, Paul had insisted that his authority to proclaim the gospel was sourced solely in his obedience to God's call. And, he said, this obedience determined the manner of his proclamation. 'When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2. 1-2). As Williams puts it, the true preacher 'is bound to point away from himself or herself', to divert attention from his or her 'skill, power or fluency. The preacher is not there to impose a personal philosophy, but to introduce people to the fullness of God's work in Jesus'. At times, then, Paul appeals explicitly to the 'vulnerability and awkwardness',<sup>2</sup> the 'foolishness' of his speech as intrinsic to its authenticity. It's precisely *because* it's not persuasive in the ordinary forms of human thought and *because* he has been dispossessed of worldly status, that through him the self-dispossessing communication of God may be glimpsed.

The same line of thought is evident in the passage we just heard from his second letter to the Corinthians. It's insofar as Paul's life is animated by the power of God that he's an authentic witness to God's reality. And this means that it's paradoxically when he is *least* successful and *most* vulnerable, when he is suffering, misunderstood, failing and persecuted, that the power of God is most likely to be visible in him. It's not that he's committed to being a victim or 'a loser'. Paul's argument is simply that, if not for the power of God at work in him, how could he remain essentially hopeful and confident, generous in spirit and loving towards others while suffering such rejection and humiliation?

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p.256.

We have this treasure, this knowledge of God, Paul writes, in clay jars – in our vulnerable minds and bodies – so that it may be clear that the extraordinary power to live differently comes from God and not from us. For it's only in connection with the divine life that we may be afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken. Just as Jesus made visible the power and resource of God's love by the way he met suffering, forgave injustice, and handed himself over to death, so we too are called to live in and from this same power so as to testify to it. Or, as Paul puts it, 'always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies'.

In all this, Paul is offering a vision of the nature of things. Yes, he says – there is suffering, injustice, pain. But underneath and threaded through it all, the creative heart of reality is love, generosity, communion, life – and it's possible for us to be in touch with this reality such that we can bear whatever befalls and 'not lose heart'. We may even come to see our experience of suffering differently as 'our inner nature' is renewed; we may consider, as he puts it, 'this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure'.

But this returns us to the question with which we began. Is this whole vision, this proclamation of a transcendent reality of love, delusional? Is it cheap rhetoric, a refusal to face the fundamental absurdity of existence and the ubiquity of meaningless suffering? How can this Christian vision be proclaimed with any integrity when we see the unfathomable grief of Gaza and of communities ravaged by famine and landslides, when there are those even in our own neighbourhoods and communities crushed by random accidents of fate, by grief and despair?

Well, let me offer how I seek to be with this tension. It seems to me that Paul's vision cannot be forced on or required of anyone. Some suffering may be beyond a person's capacity to bear or integrate, at least in this life. Simone Weil speaks of those who are truly afflicted as having been struck by a blow that can crush the soul, leaving them writhing like a worm on the ground. When someone is

afflicted, Weil thought, the only choice they may have is the direction in which to turn their gaze – whether towards God or not – and even that may seem impossible.

At times in Christian history and still today in some contexts, Paul's vision of an ever-available and transforming hope has been wielded against the afflicted. Despair is said to be a sin and the anguished loss of faith in goodness a sign of godlessness. I believe this is a terrible distortion – an aspect of the glibness that can infect Christian language and practice. The gospel *does* proclaim the possibility of God's goodness being a resource for our lives in every circumstance. But you don't come to know this by avoiding the tears of things or refusing to allow the pain of the world. Resurrection life is through death and the way is hard. Only if we've actually undergone the death will any talk of God's eternal life be true. And if we have undergone it, well – we will only ever experience compassion for those who find themselves still overwhelmed by it.

Paul's vision cannot be forced on or required of anyone. If we come to have faith in it, it's only as it somehow becomes real for us – as something touches or speaks to us. For many of us, this isn't a steady state. We grope dimly towards it or hang onto our faith by the skin of our teeth. Authentic faith is purified by doubt and authentic love by compassion – the willingness to suffer and suffer with. But I believe that what we can discover in our own experience is that this faith does in fact offer a way to remain connected to the fullness of reality – the truth of the world's pain *and* the truth of an encompassing love. It seems paradoxical, at one level nonsensical; but nevertheless a way of life. How do we discover this truth for ourselves?

Our daily access is through our practice. The daily return to silence, simplicity and stillness roots us here and now, capable of being present without evasion to everything that is – the waste and futility of aggression and greed, the grief and powerlessness of the afflicted, the call to care, act, and speak the truth, AND at the heart of and threaded through it all, the inexhaustible resource of love. So in this Dark Night of the Season, this dark night of our world, let us open our hearts anew to receive this gift and celebrate this treasure.