

‘I call you gods’¹

Fr John Dale reflects on the tensions we can feel in the face of suffering

Is there an affinity between our drive for knowledge and expertise and the feeling of let-down, even of guilt, when, despite one's best compassionate efforts, someone we have cared for dies? Is there something within the human psyche which desires to be divine and is sometimes cripplingly disappointed when it finds that it isn't? The early Fathers of the Church were sure that human beings were 'creatures of God and bidden themselves to be God' but this century has borne witness to some of the worst depravities that humans can visit upon each other: atrocities committed by people who have usurped God's unique right to be God.

As health professionals and clerics, we recognise in ourselves many conflicting emotions when faced with the reality of death, especially of someone for whom we have cared and, even for religious people, it can be difficult to generate and recognise a sense of the presence of the being called God. In that situation the absolute can appear very finite and fragile, especially when our faith also seems to be offering an end to suffering and pointing to a new and better life.

There is a two-fold danger here. First, that we separate our professional lives, where it seems God cannot possibly reside in the midst of suffering, from our private lives where God can seem much nearer and manageable. Secondly, having learned to compartmentalise God, it is all too easy to lose or forget him altogether. The one often follows the other because of a lack of authenticity in the place where we most urgently want to be 'gods'.

We need to be able to move from being sincere to being authentic in our encounter with suffering. We seek a language and context for holding in equilibrium the disparate parts of our life, the gentle and the awkward, the clear and the obscure, the familiar and the frightening: a balance which will enable us to give life to those to whom we relate both professionally and privately.

We know from our experience of intimacy with those whom we love that there is never a time when they are not part of us, present or not; life has been transformed irrevocably by that person. The struggle for intimacy involves difficult and painful self-disclosing conversation where human language can seem quite inadequate. The deepening of that intimacy does not occur while we are waiting for things to get better - there is only the lived reality of love here and now.

Similarly, people of faith need to believe that their lives are changed for ever by the intimate presence of God and that there is no part of their lives from which God is absent. Nor is there a better tomorrow when there will be no suffering, without being prepared to engage with that suffering now and to name it in all its

grimness. God is not to be found when things get better. Gandhi named that deception when he said 'If you don't find God in the next person you meet, it is a waste of time looking for him further'².

Elie Wiesel, survivor of the holocaust, says 'What happens to us touches God. What happens to Him concerns us. We suffer for the same reasons . . . Does the idea that God also suffers - that He suffers with us and therefore on our account - help us to bear our grief, or does it simply augment its weight? . . . He alone has discretion in the thousands of ways of joining his suffering to ours . . .' and elsewhere 'We know that God suffers because he tells us so'.³

Can we cope with the notion of God suffering? It does not rest easily in western culture yet is very much at the heart of the scriptural tradition of the people of the book. The Hebrew psalmists' experience of God leads them to expect of God full, active participation in human concerns, if human beings are to work hand in hand with the God upon whom they are totally dependent⁴.

As a Christian, I believe that God has told us most poignantly that he shares suffering with us to the full, in the life and death of Jesus. Why did he do it? Because he had to, because love does such things. But within this image of Jesus giving generously of his love there is also a bitter irony which more than hints at the wastefulness of it all: an irony and waste which is familiar to all who accompany others through the darkness of undeserved suffering and it simply heightens our sense of inadequacy, even of complicity. Yet we still do it. Why? Because we have to, because love does such things.

There is a story from the life of the prophet Mohammed. When one of his companions was groaning in agony, some of the others rebuked him. Mohammed interjected, saying 'Let him groan, for groaning also is one of the names of God'⁵.

References

1. Psalm 82: 6, John 10: 34
2. Nicholl D. Holiness. Darton, Longman & Todd, London. 1996. p25
3. Wiesel E. All Rivers Run to the Sea. HarperCollins, London. 1996. p103-104
4. Psalms 6, 7, 8
5. Nicholl D. Holiness. Darton, Longman & Todd, London. 1996. p131

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