

History as Revelation

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Then, I don't know how it was, but something seemed to break inside me, and I started yelling at the top of my voice. I hurled insults at him, I told him not to waste his rotten prayers on me; it was better to burn than to disappear. I'd taken him by the neckband of his cassock, and, in a sort of ecstasy of joy and rage, I poured out on him all the thoughts that had been simmering in my brain. He seemed so cocksure, you see. And yet none of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair.¹

This passage takes us into the prison cell where Albert Camus' *Outsider* awaits his execution, watching the changing colours of the sky in the daytime, and looking out for the stars at night. The chaplain had come before but he had refused to see him. He did not believe in God, and now, with the little life that was left to him, the question whether God existed or not had no importance. So he released everything inside him, and shattered the priest's hopes of doing anything for his 'soul'.

During his life, Meursault had decided to do certain things and against doing other things, and all this time, he had been waiting for this moment, and the guillotine which was now very near. The priest with his talk about God and the after-life and divine justice, was merely an irksome interruption.

'I'm sure you've often wished there was an after-life', the priest in Camus' story persists. Of course he had, but it was no more significant than wishing he could swim faster or that he had a better-shaped mouth. The memory of Marie, and those fleeting hours on the beach when they swam out into the deep water, clambered onto the raft and lay down together under the scorching sun: these were the only things worth having now. As for a life after the grave—well, all he wanted was a life in which he could remember this one on earth. The priest continued on the subject of God.

'I went up close to him and made a last attempt to explain that I'd very little time left, and I wasn't going to waste it on God'.

So Camus' story moves to a close. In the *Outsider*, we see man as he actually is, left to his own devices: emptyhanded, radically self-centred, prone to egotism rather than service, in love with life yet restless, above all, under sentence of death. There is no reason to ask the question, why there is anything at all, because life has no ultimate meaning or purpose. It matters little whether one dies at thirty or seventy. Other men and women will continue living. One is soon forgotten. In the *Outsider's*

¹Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, Penguin ed., p. 118.

indifferent universe, even love itself is overshadowed by a strangling sense that it can last only a little while, before it is cancelled by physical separation or death.

'Marie came that evening and asked me if I'd marry her. I said I didn't mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married.

Then she asked me again if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant next to nothing—but I supposed I didn't'.² The suggestion of indifference gains force if we turn to Meursault's musings in the prison cell at the very end:

'Then I did something I hadn't done for quite a while; I fell to thinking about Marie. She hadn't written for ages; probably, I surmised, she had grown tired of being the mistress of a man sentenced to death. Or she might be ill, or dead. After all, such things happen. How could I have known about it, since, apart from our two bodies, separated now, there was no link between us, nothing to remind us of each other? Supposing she were dead, her memory would mean nothing; I couldn't feel an interest in a dead girl. This seemed to me quite normal; just as I realised people would soon forget me once I was dead'.³

It would be an arrogant mistake to see ourselves as superior to all this, because of our Christian faith. It would mean ignoring our humanity, but more seriously it would mean doing violence to the very nature of the Christian message. The Outsider is everyone of us as he is, without God. Sin and evil, with all their attendant miseries and sufferings, are basic components in the human organism. Freedom does not belong to the natural status of man. It must be constantly received as experience of liberation. In the Christian setting, this liberation comes as we realise more and more that it is in man that God has revealed Himself.

Sin—guilt—the justice of God, are more important than the justice of man. The priest in Camus' story may well be a caricature but he speaks volumes about a life-denying version of Christianity which has thrived on despising the things of earth and loving the things of heaven. The story itself is a tragic commentary on the remoteness of many historical forms of religion from our daily round of work and play, love and joy and sorrow, and the hope that we all have for some kind of ultimate, human fulfilment.

One of the best statements of a priest's work I find expressed in a few lines of Patrick Kavanagh: 'He had the knack of making men feel, as small as they really were, which meant as great as God had made them'. In a very real sense, a priest has got to earn the right to speak. It is easy to drug people into a false security by falling back on secondhand thoughts about God, and 'frequent reception of the sacraments'. Very often, the result is a religion of magic and superstition.

After all this, in what sense does one earn the right to speak about God, whom no one has seen at any time? Clearly, a man takes on an enormous responsibility in daring to speak about God to other men. It is possible to avoid the living God and substitute instead, a series of idols

²Camus, p. 48.

³*Ibid.*, p. 113.

which leave untouched the burning questions which everyone wants to answer in some way—who am I?—what am I going to be? To help other people to discover God for themselves, a man must himself be close to the living God. This, more than any questions of ‘identity’, is the biggest challenge in any preparation for the priesthood. This recalls the dramatic moment at the very end of the Book of Job, a moment of rare vision for Job who has lived with a jaded, conventional notion of God, but now he experiences the mystery for himself.

‘I have been holding forth on matters I cannot understand,
on marvels beyond me and my knowledge.
I knew you then only by hearsay;
but now, having seen you with my own eyes,
I retract all I have said,
and in dust and ashes I repent’ (Job 42 :3b, 5-6).

At this moment, Job realises that God, utterly apart from the world and at the same time completely involved with the lives of His people, may give an unexpected meaning to his own routine of boredom, familiarity and suffering.

In our ministry today, how can we wipe the sleep from the tired eyes of religious cliché and help people to discover the real, living God? To put the question in another way, why was there such an enormous gap between the prison chaplain’s message, and what the man in prison was actually thinking and feeling about his own life?

The priest and the prisoner were talking different languages. They were living in different worlds. The meeting in the prison cell dramatises a certain tradition of theology and Christian preaching—still very respectable—which conceived of salvation as a supernatural entity imposed on man’s ordinary, natural existence as something extraneous. In this scheme, theology is a special, superior science, with its own privileged sources of knowledge, ultimately dependent on appeals to final authorities, the Word of God in the Bible or the Church’s magisterium. There were some crucial questions lurking behind the futile exchanges in the prison cell :

How is God related to the world? How does God reveal himself to us? How can we come to know God?

The revelation of God is not a supernatural event that breaks into history in a perpendicular line from ‘above’. God’s self-revelation comes to us indirectly *as history*. The Israelites in the Old Testament contributed decisively to our civilisation because of the way in which they interpreted their history. They saw the whole of history as the revelation of God. He revealed Himself indirectly through His acts in history. In the Bible, truth means the reliability or the faithfulness of a thing, a person, or God, which becomes evident in the course of history. Truth for the Hebrews was never available as a binding state-of-affairs in the present, but only revealed itself as true over a long period of time. They understood truth as *something that happened*, and occurred again and again in history. The psalms are full of this conviction that Yahweh is disclosed through the whole process of history :

'O praise the Lord, all you nations,
acclaim him all you peoples
Strong is his love for us;
he is faithful forever' (Psalm 116).

Very often, the evidence was all against any presence of God in the universe. The history of Israel was even more tragic and more violent than that of other small states surrounded on all sides by vast empire. They were sustained throughout by their hope in God's fidelity to His promises.

Today, the greatest enemy of religious faith is the lust for certainty. St Thomas often reminded us that we do not know *what* God is—we know more about what He is not than what He is. In our efforts to understand God, we have sometimes been disabled by the impact of the Greek understanding of truth as something which is hidden behind the flux of sense appearances, which only reason can discover. In this view, once truth is uncovered, it is timeless, indestructible and unchanging. This ignores the evident reality of our world which is always changing. Permanence is an illusion. If theology is to help us—and other people—to discover the meaning of life, we need to recover the biblical sense of the whole of reality as a history, which the Hebrews interpreted ultimately as God revealing Himself. In this way, we may come to participate in Patrick Kavanagh's beautiful insight:

God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday,
A kiss here, a laugh again
And sometimes tears—

A pearl necklace around the neck of poverty.

There is then no reason at all to distinguish between the history of salvation, and ordinary, secular history. There is no reason to have a two-tiered system of knowledge consisting of 'lower' truths, which man can grasp with his own unaided, natural reason, and 'higher' truths, which man can never attain by himself, and which are delivered to him by God by means of a 'supernatural' revelation. There is no final distinction between Revelation and natural truth. The issue here is the *mode* of God's self-revelation. There is no question of diminishing its divine origin. The point is that God respects man's natural ways of knowing in the world—experiencing, understanding and judging, and of course, going beyond experience to guess and to postulate about the nature of reality, and about God Himself. The way of thinking about man and God which we find in the Bible, interpretation of (and going beyond) human experience in history, may help us to dissolve many misplaced tensions between religion and life experience. Many people in our world have already resolved the tension for themselves like Camus' Outsider, by rejecting the very possibility of knowing God, or the possible value of knowing Him, even if this could be imagined.

Yet, when theology tries to discover and express something of the reality of God, it is like the psychologist or the poet trying to express the truth about love. The contributions of the psychologist and the poet only become significant for us, they only make sense, when we have experienced love for ourselves. Theology may put us to sleep, or it may

be an unending journey into Mystery, a reality so rich that it can never be exhausted. What makes the difference? In theology, prayer is the heart of the matter. The insights of theology become significant for us when we meet with God in prayer, even when this prayer seems to highlight the 'absence' of God. The Orthodox Church says frequently that the good theologian is not so much one who knows the history and techniques of theology, as one who knows how to pray. If the priest is to lead people to discover the living God revealed in Jesus Christ, he can only usefully share with them what he has himself discovered through the activities of theology and prayer.

The biblical writers are clear that the God of Israel only revealed Himself as true and reliable when met with trust on man's part. The essence of our faith is trust. Like Jesus in the New Testament, the man of faith today entrusts himself to God in an act of complete surrender. The dualism of the Vatican I approach to faith and reason, which still persists in much of our religious thought and practice, contributes to the tendency of Christian believers to view the universe from two distinct and autonomous stand-points, the natural and the supernatural. The dualist bias continues in spite of the evidence that there is only one single process of evolution from the very early stages of pre-life to the life of Jesus Christ. If the Christian Churches are to survive as authentic responses to the mystery of God, they must present Christianity, in their theologies and through their ministries, as the clue to understanding the whole of our universe, the whole of life.



CROSSING THE SHANNON

Waiting at night at an Irish river
For the ferry, flat, lumping the water,
Someone's fortune, miles from the old crossing.
I wipe sprayed mud from the windscreen, absorbed.
We eat what's left from a day in Galway.
Across and upriver oblongs of light
Slice in the water straight to where we are.
I think of someone somewhere else netted
By the lights, irradiating all points.

I wait, thinking of some person, moving
At peace, within that circled light, at source.

RONALD TAMPLIN