

The best of all possible worlds?

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The Recorder article of 8th April has prompted me to answer the question posed by Colin Morris. I state it simply and boldly ‘God has not created the best of all possible worlds’. We human beings are certainly responsible for the mess as Augustine has argued but I also think that God too carries some responsibility. I believe that in God’s act of atonement not only is he reconciling the world to himself but the Trinitarian God is reconciling himself to himself. I have written about this in my book ‘The Wrath of God satisfied’ which grew in part from my wild (even heretical) statement in 2007 that God needs to ‘save himself!’

In setting out a theology of mission I reflected on God’s universal Covenant (Genesis 9) which was made not only with all the inhabitants of the earth but with creation itself. The argument is fully set out in the book ‘Into the Far Country’. I re-iterate it here.

The pain love of God

God, following the flood, sets up a rainbow above the desolate landscape as a sign that a new relationship has been established with the earth and his recalcitrant partner. Under the rainbow, God engages in mission with his people to prevent a re-occurrence of holocaust. The Hebrew word qesheth, ‘bow of war’, occurs many times in the Old Testament but it is used

only here and in Ezekiel 1, 28 to describe the 'rainbow'. This sign can be taken to mean that God will never again loose his bow against the world and reduce it to chaos. But the war bow now points upwards, as it were, into the heart of God. Could this mean that if the bolt is fired again not only will creation perish but God himself will die? Is it a sign, as the Asian theologian Choan Seng Song suggests, of God's 'pain love for humanity' reaching its most agonizing depth? If so, then mission is crucial to the very life and future of God. In the covenant, God is risking all in his partnership with us. The purpose of mission is not simply 'humanization', or 'evangelization', neither is it only about the salvation of humankind and the created order. Ultimately the purpose of mission is nothing less than the liberation of God.

Why does God take such a risk? The only possible answer is that God's love is so profound that he takes ultimate responsibility for the very existence of pain in the world. Camus, speaking of the enigma of evil and suffering, may not be too far from the truth when he says, 'man is not entirely to blame; it was not he who started history.'

How can this be? There are, from our point of view, a number of possibilities. In a book which explores a selection of theodicies, John Roth argues that God

must bear his share of the responsibility for the existence of evil because 'he is the one who ultimately sets the boundaries in which we live and move and have our being'. In the very act of creating the universe, God's sacrificial self-limitation is necessary in the bestowal of his gift of freedom upon creation. Yet what if God's self-restraint is excessive; permitting the emergence of the wild and unrestrained? Second, the first creation story assumes the presence of the wild watery forces of chaos which was later to flood the earth (Gen.1.1). Although tamed 'they never lose their unpredictable power to upset the order and harmony of creation'. Indeed it has been suggested that chaos exists because of the failure of God's previous attempts at creating. Mess and creativity belong together as any imaginative artist will tell you. But what is the nature of 'the mess' out of which God creates? How toxic is it? A third way of looking at this puzzle is to imagine God creating in the youthful exuberance of play, but such are the explosive energies of Spirit that the chaotic is released alongside the symbiotic. However one tries to explain it, there is tragedy here! Wheat and tares are mysteriously sown into the very structure of this violent universe in such proportions that evil is able to thrive more rapidly than goodness.

Yet this assignment of evil to God's creation is contradicted by the Biblical refrain, 'and God saw that

it was good' (Gen.1). I suggest that theodicies of protest are essential in such a world as ours, and the Bible is not devoid of these as illustrated by the book of Job. Indeed, in the face of the covenant-making God, it is faithful human action to rage and protest, since rage is the gate to hope. It is not that God has a moral defect. It is not that God has done an inadequate job. It is a question of whether we can trust such a God who, from our point of view, does not seem to have created, what philosophical theology calls, 'the best of all possible worlds'.

God's repentance

The rainbow covenant is a sign of God's 'repentance as well as his promise'. God in his grace 'chooses' to hold himself accountable for the tragedies of creation. He does not wish to exclude himself or excuse himself from responsibility. For love's sake he embraces even the failed responsibility of human beings. As Karl Barth points out, God becomes the Judge who is Judged in our place. 'He makes his own the being of man under the curse of contradiction, but in order to do away with it as He suffers it. He acts as Lord over this contradiction even as He subjects Himself to it.' The cross, according to Moltmann, is the division of God from God to the utmost degree, while the resurrection is the union of God with God in the most intimate fellowship. So the optimism of grace is revealed in the 'pain-love' of God. It is because he

freely and graciously takes to himself the ultimate responsibility for everything that we can say with Job, 'Though he slay me yet will I trust him (Job.13.15).'

So in recurrent acts of grace God scatters sparks of 'his shattered divinity' into the emptiness and leaves living echoes of himself embedded in the moving matrix of history. Yet God is not like the entropic Humpty Dumpty of the Western nursery rhyme, always flying apart in a great measure of disorder. God is not split off from himself; that is our condition. Rather we are witnessing here the pain-love of God for, in the words of Helmut Gollwitzer, 'God himself is forsaken by God, God himself rejects himself'. The song of joy at the birth of the cosmos is also a cry of pain (Job 3).

So creation becomes for God a moment of acute self awareness and discovery. Good and evil have come to exist in the world and God makes himself accountable and forges a covenant with Noah. By this action he reveals his heart of grace and through the covenant he embraces our flawed existence. It is as if 'God must, therefore, pass through time to attain his own eternal being and in this passage he must experience the pain as un-transmuted pain. Only thus can he transmute it, and, by it attain his own perfect bliss'. So he 'comes down' (Gen.11.5) into the 'far country' to fully experience the pain of a partnership with his violent

creation. He embraces us along with the brutality of our sin, and it hurts him.

The dance of joy?

Bound to us by his covenant promise God awaits his own liberation in our release. When this is accomplished creation will again dance for joy (Rom. 8.20-21) and God will be able to return from the 'far country'.

In anguish of heart and purpose he now moves through space and time. His mission and our mission are locked together. His own suffering love lures us on. His future and ours is at stake. The redemption of all things is the end, miracles of grace are the means. The music that propels God into mission is not the tooting of heavenly trumpets but the sound of his own primal earth-creating cry of pain.

This same pain is revealed in Calvary's cross where God as victor chooses to be the victim and the eternal pain-bearer. Christ's death demonstrates the principle of sacrifice active in the heart of God before the foundation of the world, and now continually propagated through space and time. Christ's the resurrection proclaims the ultimate triumph of love and the promise of a new creation.

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