

Trinity 10 2008

If you were at evensong last week, you will know that I read one of R. S Thomas's poems. He was one of our great religious poets, but many of his poems deal not so much with the nature of God as with the absence of God – and it was one such that I read and which I would like to read again now.

It is called **Via Negativa**

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.

There can be something about organised worship that smacks of the emperor's new clothes. We all say the creed, the language of the liturgy and the hymns speak of this close loving relationship with Jesus, but there is a fear that if we once say 'actually, I sometimes wonder where God is', that the whole edifice might come tumbling down.

Well, let me assure you, it won't.

People have been acknowledging this sense of the absence of God for years - from the Psalms: psalm 10 'why standest thou so far off O Lord; and hidest thy face in the needful time of trouble? , or, from Lamentations, 'why have you forgotten us completely? Why have you forsaken us these many days?' Indeed Jesus on the cross, quoted psalm 22 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It is an experience echoed by so many of the great spiritual writers from St Anselm through to Kierkegaard. It is an integral part of our journey of faith.

A week or so ago I was pouring out a tale of woe to someone who is not a Christian, and she said, 'Well you must find your faith a great comfort.'

I decided not to upset her by saying 'no', that at that precise moment if anything, having a faith was making matters worse.

Faith isn't always comforting. Sometimes it is challenging, sometimes it is confusing, sometimes it is amazingly life-enhancing. And sometimes it is challenged, because it seems as though just when you need him, God has put up a notice saying 'out to lunch' with no indication of when he will come back.

It is recognising that God-shaped gap that is important.

There is a huge difference between the absence of a child who has gone to Australia and the absence of someone you have never met. The one leaves a gap in your life, a sense of something missing, the other leaves no mark.

It is interesting to note how many people, including those who have no idea of God, feel that there is something missing from their lives?

Often they do not know what to call it – a spiritual dimension, a sense of purpose? Before they or we can grow in faith, we need to understand that this sense of loss, of something missing, is a God-shaped gap.

Many people attempt to plug the gap with endless activity, material possessions, holidays, sport or gardening. But they are the wrong shape to fill the gap.
It is a God-shaped space.

Unlike a jigsaw puzzle though, we cannot simply find a piece and slot in it. Sometimes we think we can, and sometimes the church tells us we can do exactly that, and then it is hard indeed when we realise that the piece we have inserted doesn't complete the picture.

Our faith is in the longing, in the knowledge that God flows through this space, or rather, that we flow through the eternal matrix that is God.

When we seek to understand, seek to recognise this absence and know that we must connect with God, then we will find love and compassion, freedom and hope.
Then we will know that this absence, this perceived separation from God, is only because God is bigger, greater, than we ever can imagine, he is indeed the interstices in our knowledge and the darkness between stars. He is the giver of life in whom we live and breathe and move. The sense of gap or absence is inevitable, it empowers us to search for God and to realise that he is everywhere.

When we understand that, we can say with confidence as Paul did

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We live in God and he lives in us.

Knowing that, we will be able to buy the pearl of great price or find the hidden treasure. For God that is everywhere, he is the darkness between the stars, he holds all creation and can transform not just our own lives, but the universe and all that is in it. And we, co-creators on this earth, have been shown through Christ an image of this perfection, God's kingdom, to which we are called.

This journey to find the pearl, the kingdom, starts with our need, our recognition of the absence of God.

Let me end by reading another of R. S. Thomas's poems, called **The Kingdom**

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
your need only and the simple offering

Of your faith, green as a leaf.