

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick
2nd Sunday before Lent 2015

Col 1: 15-20/Jn 1: 1-14

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was **with** God, and the Word **was** God.
(Jn 1: 1)*

God's been in the news a good deal in recent days, ever since Stephen Fry's outburst on an Irish TV programme in which he denounced God as "utterly evil, capricious and monstrous" – *if* he **were** to exist. In his imaginary conversation with God, Fry says he would tell him: "How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It's not right." Pressed by his interviewer over how he would react if he was met by God at the pearly gates, Fry says: "I would say: 'bone cancer in children? What's that about?'" And he reflects, "Because the God who created this universe, if it was created by God, is quite clearly a maniac [and] totally selfish. We have to spend our life on our knees thanking him?! What kind of god would do that?" (*The Guardian* 1st Feb 2015)

As we might imagine there's been a great deal of comment as people have come out on one side or another in this debate. Some church leaders have condemned Fry for his remarks, whilst the Archbishop of Canterbury has defended Fry's right to make such comments saying, in his own typically honest fashion, that: "the Church must speak out in defence of religious freedom – but with the humility of a reformed alcoholic who recognises that they once practised the very things they now urge people not to do." (*The Telegraph* 4th Feb 2015)

Surprisingly perhaps one of the most insightful critiques of Fry's observations has come from the comedian Russell Brand. He speaks positively of Fry but goes on to make some affirming comments on the value of faith and spirituality, concluding that: 'You can't judge religion on the most stupid bits.' (*YouTube*, 2nd Feb 2015)

Now ... whatever we make of the *characters* involved in this debate – and Stephen Fry, Russell Brand and Justin Welby will all have their fans and their critics – the crucial thing is not the *personalities* but the profound question under discussion. The issue of suffering and a God of love is one of the most significant barriers to faith in our world. And even people of faith *may* have a good deal of sympathy for Fry's perspective. He's clearly not alone in having observed cancer and other forms of illness and questioned where is God in such things. Others have been overwhelmed by the weight of evidence of starvation and brutality from around the globe. And some simply look at the world and see it primarily in terms of absence rather than presence. They cannot see signs of an intelligent and loving purpose, only a completely random and meaningless set of occurrences.

On the whole, our Sunday lectionary readings over their 3-year cycle allow us to focus on the central Christian belief that God does all things out of a divine love for creation. Even when the readings focus on the suffering of, for example, Paul or the Christian community, this pain is held securely in a circle of belief about its value and meaning. For those who're already so deeply committed to the purposes of God that they see everything (whether good or bad) as part of that circle of belief in God's grace, it's sometimes hard to hear the seriousness, and indeed the religious basis, of this question about God and suffering. Indeed, rather than condemning Fry, one

clerical commentator noted that his words were almost biblical in their theological intensity. (Giles Fraser, *The Guardian* 2nd Feb 2015)

And those who, like Stephen Fry, ask this question long with a passion to see a world in which they could believe in the goodness of, God, but they just can't.

Today's readings do affirm the goodness of creation and of its Creator, but in a way that requires us to take religious questioning seriously. And that's because at the heart of what's being said there is the statement that God's creative intelligence has something about it that we can hopefully recognise. The Letter to the Colossians calls it *Reconciliation*, John's Gospel calls it the *Word*, and consistently throughout their writings John and Paul both call it *Jesus*. Jesus is the language in which the Creator speaks to us, a language which we at least partly know, and which we can learn if we try, with a lot of help,

Colossians acknowledges that there's something wrong, something out of kilter with our world and our experience. That's why there's a need for reconciliation – reconciliation between ourselves and between ourselves and God. And the writer of this letter locates the source of that reconciliation in Jesus: *Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible* (Col 1: 15-16a).

John, too, describes God's creative work as being shaped in a way that is, in principle, comprehensible to us. God speaks the Word, and the Word is, by definition, a means of communication. Indeed, communication is one of the characteristics of human beings. For John, God's whole purpose, from beginning to end, is to communicate with us and allow us to begin to enter into that communication; to begin to learn to speak God's Word. But John introduces a cautionary note, which is also bitterly ironic. God speaks to us in a language that we were designed to understand, and comes to us in a form that is utterly familiar to us, and yet some of us still manage not to recognise him. John can see only an aching waste of those who cannot hear when God speaks to them in their own language.

And in a real sense that brings us back to the challenge laid down by Stephen Fry. It's difficult to see God in the suffering of others and that was certainly the case for most, if not all, of those who looked on as Jesus died on the cross. A suffering Messiah was not something that anyone was really expecting – with the possible exception of some key chapters in Isaiah. So in many ways it's not surprising that (in the words of today's Gospel) 'his own people did not accept him'. We cannot pretend that finding God in the midst of pain is easy yet John's Gospel is surely right to link the coming of Christ with the creation of the world. Because if creation as a whole is to make any sense then we must find meaning in the darkness as well as in the light. And the presence of God in the pain of the cross is a first step. It's not the whole answer but it does point to the Christian hope that everything is made in and through the wisdom of God, and therefore nothing is ultimately beyond God's redeeming love.

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