

Sermon - R. S. Thomas
St Mary's Church, Warwick
Sunday 8 October 2006

The job of an Archbishop is to try and explain and commend the Christian faith. If I am honest, I do not always find the Gospel easy to explain, or interpret. I find it even more difficult to live out, and people who tell me that it is all simple, easy and straightforward underestimate the difficulties that many people face in trying to understand and absorb the Gospel, even when they long to do so. And you only have to look at some of the debates on human sexuality going on in the Anglican Communion at the present time, to realise that nothing is as easy and simple as it first looks. The drumbeats of the fundamentalist approach to scripture and a simplistic approach to the life of faith do not really resonate with my own heartbeat. And the church has always interpreted and re-interpreted Scripture. Look at the question of divorce and re-marriage - the actual words of Jesus seem very straightforward – no divorce and no re-marriage according to St Mark. Yet the Jesus of St Mathew's gospel allows it, under certain circumstances as does St Paul in his letters, and as do many Anglican provinces. Perhaps this is why I find the poetry of R S Thomas so refreshing and illuminating. For him, truth about God can best be conveyed in the language of metaphor and poetry, for we are not dealing with an object amidst other objects but with the living God himself. As another poet Emily Dickenson put it "To tell the truth you must tell it slant."

R S Thomas was, to my mind, one of the finest priest poets of the 20th Century, and his poetry arose out of his priesthood and his attempt to live a Christian life. He wrote extensively about God and Christianity and as I read that poetry he gives me enormous

illumination into the life of faith, often in a tantalising way, and what I would like to do in this sermon is to show what profound and penetrating insights he has about God and Jesus and how that can help us in our own journeys of faith.

R S Thomas died in September 2000, aged 87, and was arguably the greatest Anglo-Welsh poet of his time. His work has been translated into many languages, and so he is a poet of world renown. He was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize for Poetry, and there are some who believe that he was a better poet than Seamus Heaney, who did actually win the prize. He wrote the equivalent of one poem every fortnight for fifty years, for he wrote something like 1500 poems. He was shaped by his priesthood, but his faith was not a simple, uncomplicated faith. He shirked none of the hard questions that believing in God entails. So a lot of his poetry bears the stamp of his inner wrestling with God as he strives to make sense of God's purposes in the universe. Thomas' life was a perpetual striving to find meaning amongst the uncertainties of a modern world. But, "there is nothing more important" he wrote "than seeking a relationship with God." He regarded himself as a religious poet.

In his introduction to the Penguin Book of Religious Verse, he defines religion as the response of the whole person to reality, and poetry as the imaginative presentation of it. He says:

'Poetry is that
which arrives at the intellect
by way of the heart.'

One's vital emotion must be totally engaged and yet be controlled by the intellect.

I think he speaks to our generation because his questions are our questions. Some people find R S Thomas' poetry bleak and rather depressing. There is certainly sparseness in his language and in his thought, but he says there is nothing more difficult and problematic than establishing a relationship with God, for as he put it 'who is it who ever saw God? Whoever heard him speak? We have to live virtually the whole of our lives in the presence of an invisible and mute God. But that was never a bar to anyone seeking to come into contact with Him. That is what prayer is all about,' says R S Thomas.

By confronting this question of the elusiveness and the absence of God, R S Thomas, I suppose, reflects the experience of the modern age, because we do live in a de-sacralised universe, as somebody put it, where God isn't seen as counting for very much or as playing an active part in the world about us. And it's difficult at times to believe that there is a God, still less that there is a God of love. And yet, the fact that God is felt to be absent isn't just a feature of the modern age. There have always been complaints about the seeming absence of God. If you look at some of the Psalms, such as Psalm 88, 'Lord, why do you hide your face from me' or Psalm 89, 'How long, Lord, will you hide your face from sight', these are familiar themes.

R S Thomas says that to define God is impossible. You can't capture God in a definition, and that's why the major themes of his poetry are about the hiddenness of God, the elusiveness of God, the mystery of God, the silence of God, the darkness of God, even the absence of God. When he examines these themes, he shows, I think, how steeped he was in Holy Scripture, in the writings of the Fathers, in the Christian mystics, and indeed in the classics. Christian tradition has always maintained that God is ultimately unknowable as He is in Himself, a mystery to which our human words can only point by analogy. Only something that can be fully defined can be proved,

and so, since it is impossible to prove the existence of God in the abstract, God remains a concept, an idea if you like, about the way things are. Thomas reminds us that God isn't an object among other objects to be explored, but a mystery in whose presence one can ultimately only rest in faith, hope and prayerful silence. Since God is beyond anything, which we can conceive or understand, it's only through using images, metaphors and analogies that we can begin to find a language for Him, and whatever language we use about Him is always provisional, incomplete, inadequate. One often has to resort to saying what God is not, rather than what He is, and that's in line with Orthodox Christianity. After all, it was the prophet Isaiah who said 'To whom can God be compared? His thoughts are not our thoughts; His ways are not our ways'. As R S Thomas himself says, 'it's the attempt to define him – that's when the trouble begins – perhaps we shouldn't attempt to define him, because if the creature can comprehend his creator, his creator is no longer a creator.' So he writes:

'My equations fail
As my words do.'

'Genes and molecules
Have no more power to call
Him up than the incense of the Hebrews.'

Modern technological man has no more ability to reach him than his less sophisticated predecessors because God is awesome and beyond our reach. So in a striking image the poet compares, trying to understand God to the way waves run up the shore, only to fall back again. So the poet like the tidal wave runs:

'up the approaches of God

and falls back.’

Silence, says R S Thomas, is God’s chosen medium of communication. The silent God evokes our silence in turn in His presence, but the paradox is that in and through that silence, an encounter sometimes occurs. ‘It’s in a soundless darkness in the shadow of his regard’. God is somehow there.

Now, you may think, there’s nothing to this and one has just got to sit back and watch and wait. But that’s not what he’s talking about. He’s talking about an alert kind of attention to God’s presence. It’s attempting to be still in the presence of God, and if you attempt to be still in the presence of God, it requires a lot of hard work. It requires alertness and openness to what God may have to offer. It’s about searching for the otherness of God, if you like, and that involves effort and devotion because he writes: ‘the poet makes his return on his knees.’

There’s no guarantee, of course, that in that silence, in that darkness that God will necessarily respond. But the desire of the poet for God is a desire of the heart; it’s not a desire of the intellect. R S Thomas speaks about this desire of the heart, the desire to enter into the darkness of God. It’s quite obvious from his poetry that R S Thomas used to spend a great deal of time in church where he could find peace and quietness, waiting for God to speak.

‘Moments of great calm before an altar of wood in a stone church in summer,
waiting for the God to speak,
the air a staircase for silence.’

For R S Thomas, praying is hard work, for to be still, you have to pay attention. It’s a relationship of love, and it’s more of a listening than a talking. It’s waiting for God. It’s opening one self to God. Prayer is about submitting one’s will to God; it’s not attempting to enforce one’s own will on God.

We live in a world of instant everything – our world wants things and it wants them immediately. R S Thomas reminds us that to attain a relationship with God requires time, effort, patience, perseverance. It takes a lifetime and more, and this relationship is not a relationship of equals, and God is elusive, silent, indefinable – because He is God. It is a timely reminder to our age when the impression is sometimes given that God is easily understood, his mind easy to read, and can be evoked at will. Both the Bible and Christian tradition are on R S Thomas’ side, and we forget that at our peril.

In the light of all this, he has some profound things to say about prayer. Prayer, he says, isn’t the reciting of verbal formulae in God’s presence. He has no patience with the kind of person who would talk to God as if God were eavesdropping in the doorway, or using God as a kind of person to whom you give a shopping list of desire:

‘I would have knelt
long, wrestling with you, wearing
you down. Hear my prayer, Lord, hear
my prayer. As though you were deaf, myriads
of mortals have kept up their shrill
cry, explaining your silence by
their unfitness.

It begins to appear
This is not what prayer is about.'

He speaks about the change he himself had felt about praying
to God.

'It had begun
by my talking all of the time
repeating the worn formulae
of the churches in the belief
that was prayer. Why does silence
suggest disapproval?

Again he writes:

'Prayers like gravel
flung at the sky's
window, hoping to attract
the loved one's
attention.'

implying that the more you bombard God with your requests, then
the more God will listen. He says that God doesn't answer prayer in a
mechanical or arbitrary way. He, nevertheless, does reveal Himself in
and through silence, and he's honest enough to say there are times
when he almost gave up the practice of prayer:

'I would
have refrained long since
but that peering once
through my locked fingers
I thought that I detected
the movement of a curtain.'

The occasional feeling that God is present to him, enables the
poet to persevere, but it is about nurturing a relationship, not
seeking answers to a list of demands.

But for R S Thomas, God does reveal Himself if one knows
where to look. He, himself, was a very keen birdwatcher, and he
believed that God revealed Himself through the natural world.

'It was like a church to me.
I entered it on soft foot,
breath held like a cap in the hand.
It was quiet.
What God was there made himself felt,
not listened to.

There were no prayers said. But stillness
of the heart's passions – that was praise enough;
I walked on,
simple and poor, while the air crumbled
and broke on me generously as bread.'

Now, that's a deeply reverential poem about God's revelation
of Himself through the world of nature. It's a sacramental presence
because what he's saying is that it crumbles and breaks on the poet
like the sacramental bread of the Eucharist. But this God is to be
found in all kinds of places if one has eyes to see, because He is the
God of the whole universe.

'God is in the throat of a bird...
God is in the sound of the white water
falling at Cynfal In the flowers,
in the wild hare.'

'Many creatures
reflect you, the flowers
your colour, the tides the precision
of your calculations.'

But God is particularly revealed in and through birds:.

'There is a presence whose language
is not our language, but who has chosen
with peculiar clarity the feathered
creatures to convey the austerity of his
thought in song.'

Birds can be economical in the way they communicate. But if you know what to listen for, birdwatchers say that there's real communication going on, and what the poet is saying is that God's communication is akin to birdsong because, in fact, he may speak very little, but he does speak but you have to listen hard to what He is saying. There is an economy, if you like, about God's self-revelation:

'It is when one is not looking
..... that God comes.'

Then he goes on to say:

'So in every day life
it is the plain facts and natural happenings
that conceal God and reveal his to us
little by little under the mind's tooling.'

'I feel the power
that, invisible, catches me
by the sleeve.'

God isn't predictable, you can't pin him down, you can't guarantee to find him in and through the natural world, but there are moments, if you are alert enough, when that does happen. But what the poet is also saying is that the God who created this world continues to reveal Himself in and through it, and that it is often through the events of every day life that we discover God and His will for us. In other words, God is not abstracted from His world, but is revealed in and through it.

But where is God in a world where there is so much suffering and pain?:

'And in the book I read
"God is love". But lifting
my head, I do not find it so.'

Those words go to the heart of the dilemma of anybody who is a religious believer. How do you make sense of a world where there is so much cruelty and violence and still believe in God? These are questions that cannot be avoided by any thinking person. Thomas is not a systematic theologian. He doesn't set out to explain how you can reconcile a God of love with the cruelty to be found in the world. He simply takes for granted that God is a God of love, and that that love is revealed supremely in Jesus. It isn't an attempt at an explanation, but rather is a response to the question of evil. So, he takes for granted the person of Jesus and since the central message of Jesus was about loving God and loving others, and the heart of the

Christian Gospel is about God's love for humanity and the world, the poet as a Christian struggles to convey how that love is manifested through the person of Jesus, when there is so much evidence in the world that points the other way. It is as today's Epistle to the Hebrews puts it – through Jesus God has spoken to us by a Son. That is a statement of faith not a rational exposition of a fact.

'He kneeled long,
and saw love in a dark crown
of thorns blazing, and a winter tree
golden with fruit of a man's body.'

In other words, what R S Thomas is saying is that in and through the crucifixion of Jesus, the love of God shines through. Through the crucified body of Jesus, you see something of God's love. That's a vision depicted here by golden fruit, gold being the traditional colour of divinity. So a tree which might look very dead in winter, is in fact full both of golden fruit and blazing thorns. So the poet writes, on the tree of the Cross, God's love blazes out in Jesus despite his agony.

Another poem has the same theme of this new life coming through the Cross of Jesus:

'Not the empty tomb
but the uninhabited
cross. Look long enough
and you will see the arms
put on leaves. Not a crown
of thorns but a crown of flowers
haloing it, with a bird singing
as though perched on paradise's threshold.'

God responds to evil by seeking to absorb it through love and compassion.

So, in and through Jesus, to R S Thomas, God is revealed in suffering identifying with his world, and there are many poems which stresses this theme of God's love being revealed through Jesus. For R S Thomas, if people want to know what God is really like then they have to look at Jesus, because he believed that it was in and through Jesus that God's love was disclosed as fully as it could be disclosed in a human being. That, of course, is in line with Christian Orthodoxy. So, it's interesting that, although it's impossible, as he says in other poems, to fully understand and comprehend God, yet this God is not some kind of remote, inaccessible, impassable God, unaffected by what happens to His world. In Jesus, God draws near to His world, suffers with His world, and his nature is that of outflowing love towards that world. That is how God responds to the evil and tragedy of His world – by being involved in it. At one and the same time, God is absolutely different from and beyond his world, and yet in and through Jesus relates to that world in self-giving compassion and love. The action of Jesus is the action of God and the two things cannot be separated. The cross of Jesus, for R S Thomas, lies at the heart of all of that, because this God suffers in and with his world, and aches with it in its brokenness and its tragic happenings. Now that's not an explanation for human suffering, but it is a response to that suffering and again is in line with the New Testament which also does not explain suffering but responds to it with the belief that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.'

'This Christmas before
an altar of gold
the holly will remind
us how love bleeds.'

The Cross is:

‘a mystery
terrifying enough to be named love.’

How that is so, is for us to work at and work out. There are not trite, simplistic answers just a conviction that God’s nature is love.

R S Thomas is not always terribly polite about the church:

‘We have over furnished
our faith, Our churches
are limousines in the procession
towards heaven.’

We carry too much baggage and he chastises the church for trying to pin God down too neatly:

They laid this stone trap
For him, enticing him with candles
As though he would come like some
huge moth
Out of the darkness to beat there.’

The Church cannot contain the living God. He has sovereign freedom to act as he wills, and is not at the Church’s beck and call. In his last volume, which was published posthumously, he says,

‘History showed us
He was too big to be nailed to the wall

Of a stone chapel, yet still we crammed him
Between the boards of a black book.’

So he comes back to this question again and again of being unable to pin down the living God. He suggests that all our ideas, all our doctrines of God are provisional. For God is infinitely bigger and more mysterious than we can ever think or imagine as mere humans. There are no neat solutions. Religion has a tendency to want to tidy things up. In fact, he says, Christian faith is more about asking questions than giving answers.

But paradoxically he is a poet of hope. We tend to be obsessed with statistics and attendance figures and worried that the church’s influence is not what it once was. He reminds us of our long and of how deeply the Christian faith has influenced this country’s life:

‘These very seas
are baptised. The parish
has a saint’s name, time cannot unfrock
people
are becoming pilgrims
again; if not to this place
then to the recreation of it
in their own spirit. You must
remain kneeling.