

Letter 5

Dear Alex,

I'm sorry I left my thoughts in mid-air last time. Yes, I do want to affirm intellectual defences of the Faith but why are you so concerned to get God off the hook? The fact is that suffering and evil do exist and that the Christian Faith claims that God is at the same time loving and sovereign over all he has made. Paul says it clearly: Jesus is Lord. I can see why you think God needs rescuing. But that's to slip back into the problem-solving approach. Suppose we ask another question: what do we make of the suffering of Christ? He was, after all, God's Son.

By reframing the question in this way, we find ourselves in different terrain. Instead of trying to get God off the hook, we impale him firmly on the cross – which is where he should be. In other words, the key to the mystery is not theodicy (at least not by itself) but Christ. Alongside my cry of 'Why Renee?' must be juxtaposed the cry of another: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Two cries of dereliction: one God called upon to answer both.

But does he answer? At first sight, no. He stays silent. The Son suffers and dies while the Father looks on. Is the Father indifferent? That's how it appears but surely it can't be. And so we begin to discern a clue to the mystery of our own suffering. The dying Jesus cries out and God apparently does nothing. That's the way it feels so often when *we* suffer. But wait – he does do something: he enters into the dereliction of the Son so that the suffering of the Son becomes the suffering of the Father and is thereby taken into the life of the Triune Godhead. Jürgen Moltmann puts it like this: 'The abandonment on the cross which separates the Son from the Father is something which takes place within God himself.'¹⁰ And again, 'In the Passion of

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), pp. 151–2.

the Son, death comes upon God himself, and the Father suffers the death of his Son in his love for forsaken man.¹¹

So the Father does suffer after all. But it's not the suffering of the passive onlooker: rather, it's the suffering of identification. The Father is at one with his Son on the Cross. In Galot's words, 'In the suffering face of the Savior we must also see the suffering face of the Father. Jesus' human suffering enables us to enter into the mystery of the Father's divine suffering.'¹²

What's more, since Jesus is the Son of Man as well as the Son of God, it is the suffering of humanity that is represented and experienced on the Cross. Jesus is the representative human being, the second Adam. Although he dies that we might be forgiven, he bears not just our sin but our suffering as well. And because both Father and Son experience the pain of separation and loss, the death of Christ is a Trinitarian event. Here's Moltmann again:

What happens on Golgotha reaches into the very depths of the Godhead and therefore puts its impress on the Trinitarian life of God in eternity. In Christian faith, the cross is always at the centre of the Trinity, for the cross reveals the heart of the triune God, which beats for his whole creation.¹³

This is heavy duty theology, I realise. But suffering is a heavy duty subject – no, it's a heavy duty *experience*. The point I'm trying to make is that in the midst of our pain, only a suffering God can help. The God of the philosophers won't do. We need a God who knows what it means to be in pain, not by observing dispassionately but by experiencing it for himself. This is why the incarnation is crucial. The mystery of why we suffer can only be met by the mystery of why the incarnate God suffers.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 192.

¹² Ibid. Quoted in Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, p. 18.

¹³ Ibid., note 52.

And the answer to that lies in yet another mystery – that of incarnate love. 'The Father suffers the death of the Son in his love for forsaken man.'

If we come to the cross, then, with the question: 'Why do we suffer,' we shall be disappointed. But if we approach it with the question: 'How should we suffer?' we shall find our answer in this most profound of all mysteries: that it is God who suffers.

To someone who has been torn apart by grief, this comes as an unimaginable consolation. For what it tells us is that we grieve in company with God. I don't mean simply that he walks with us (as it were) but that he himself knows the reality of a grieving Father's heart. He has grieved the death of his Son. And if, as Moltmann suggests, 'the greater the love, the deeper the grief', God must know the greatest depths of all.¹⁴ For what else was the relationship between Father and Son if not pure love? This surely gets him off the hook, though ironically only by remaining on the cross.

But is that where he has to stay? Do we have only a suffering God who helps by virtue of his identification with our pain but who can do nothing about it? This is where I have been helped by the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. Soon after arriving in Pasadena last April at the start of those awful six weeks following Renee's death, I found myself reading his book *The Bible Makes Sense*. Needless to say, nothing at all made much sense to me back then but I was struck nonetheless by his comment that: 'The way to Easter is Good Friday. The victory of resurrection requires the vulnerability of crucifixion.'¹⁵

What this means is that the only way to resurrection is through death. Death is the last enemy but its power is broken because, far from being the ogre that can never be beaten, it has already been overthrown by the cross and resurrection of Christ.

¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (London: SCM, 1996).

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Winona MN: St Mary's Press, 1997 edn), p. 98.

Jesus is not only the representative human being in his death but is at the same time the representative human being in his rising. His resurrection is the prototype of humanity's own. Death may for a time apparently win but in fact it is vanquished. Renee is already the conqueror.

Consequently, death is relativised: it becomes the necessary gateway to resurrection life in all its fullness. There simply can be no resurrection without death first. It is the only way. The pattern is clear: no victory without vulnerability; no resurrection without death.

This, of course, is something Renee knew full well. She and I had talked about it several times following her 1998 cancer. It was never the fact of death she feared, only the manner of dying (as, I suspect, do we all). In the event, her ending was merciful and swift – as she wanted.

But at what cost! Her own death may have been pain-free but the consequent pain for the rest of us has seemed at times unbearable. Yet even here the vulnerability-victory/death-resurrection pattern presents itself. For it suggests that we who grieve will one day find new life arising out of death. Our vulnerability will ultimately give way to victory, whatever form that might take.

I realise all this may sound terribly pious and precious; and, believe me Alex, I hate that kind of talk as much as you do. It can sound so disconnected from reality. This is where I have found a second passage from Brueggemann pertinent: 'Jesus and his people always live between the banishment of [Good] Friday and the gathering of [Easter] Sunday, always between the exile of crucifixion and the new community of resurrection.'¹⁶

This struck me so much that here's what I wrote by way of reflection at the time:

1. Christians have always to confront the reality of death and dying in the world as it is, not in the world as we would like

it to be. We are, until the Last Day, in-betweeners – people who inhabit an in-between land. We have neither completely escaped the pull of Good Friday nor reached the glory of Easter Day.

2. We nevertheless live in faith – not the fragile wishful thinking that is often associated with that word but the trustful looking-forward that the writer to the Hebrews speaks of: '... the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb. 11:1). This can only come from God and be sustained by him.
3. Whatever my own future holds, I shall find myself living in the light both of Renee's death and of her resurrection. This will mean that in the state of in-betweenness, grief will always co-exist with hope. The period between Friday and Sunday is lived as tension between each. I shouldn't run away from this but should recognise it for what it is: both gift and task.

None of this is easy but as you see, I haven't departed the Faith and don't intend to. It's theology that is enabling me to make sense of tragedy in the end. There's no neat solution – a kind of theological QED. But how could there be? We're dealing with a double mystery: the existence of suffering in God's good creation; and the truth of divine suffering as a fact of the universe. We may not be content that there seems to be no final answer to fit our canons of intellectual tidiness but I'm relieved that it should be so. I'd rather have mystery than puzzle anyday.

How about you? Which would you prefer? My money's on your being a puzzler. But I could be wrong ...

Francis

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 94.