



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

4th Sunday of Lent Year B

God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son

Readings: Chronicles 36: 14-16, 19-23; Ps 136, Ephesians 2: 4-10, John 3: 14-21

In a few days' time I will be joining an ecumenical platform of local clergy in a village hall not far from here. We have been asked to speak (and answer questions) on the topic, 'Do you think God really exists?'

I don't intend to rehearse my response here though the simple answer would be remarkably brief.

Many years ago I officiated at the funeral of a well-known Trades Union leader. At the gathering afterwards his successor, a militant atheist, drew me aside into his wood panelled office, sat me down and closed the door. Looking me straight in the eye he said, 'You really believe that don't you? Can you tell me why?' It was said without aggression or confrontation, he was genuinely interested.

I explained that indeed I did. This was not a hobby and I did not come to paper over the emotional cracks at the death rites of the uncommitted with a few carefully chosen platitudes. I talked to him of Jesus and the implications of the Resurrection. We had a fascinating twenty minutes before rejoining the comrades.

What was clear from our conversation was that the God, in whom my interlocutor did not believe, bore no relation to the God whom we worship and know in Christ. The new General Secretary had acquired a picture of God which made no sense to me either but a picture which has become increasingly the standard 'Aunt Sally' of public debate in this era of fashionable atheism.

These two things are worth remembering in any conversations we may have about the Faith in our modern society.

1) Atheism may be prevalent but it is, historically, a minor sport. Almost alone in the history of Man, late Western European decadent civilisation has embraced non-belief as normal.

2) The picture of the god they have rejected is a forgery.

Of course there have been many differing attempts to define God in the history of Man. There is the pagan pantheon where a whole cast of unlikely creatures claim sway over different aspects of creation and are subject to all too human frailties. There is the divine seen as pure spiritual essence from which we emanate and to which, in some amorphous cosmic soup, we will return. There is God the legalist whose relationship to Man is determined by a spiritual calculator of our obedience. There is the God of judgement whose claim to be merciful sits oddly against his equally proclaimed regime of fear. There is the theology of Man as a toy in the game of the gods.

You may recall that powerful piteous line from Act IV of King Lear where the blinded, exiled and distraught Gloucester cries out: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport.'

All of these concepts, singly or muddled together, may inform the mind of the modern agnostic or atheist. What they all have in common is that they are not Christian. If a man wants to reject Christ then at least he should know whom he is rejecting and not spend his life alienated from God by ignorance.

Today's Gospel goes to the heart of the matter and, in the words of Jesus Himself, defines the nature of God and the plan of the salvation of Man: *'God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.'* *John 3v16.*

'God' – there is one God, not a tangle of competing godlets. He is the origin and end of all. Polytheism and paganism are a primitive intimation of divine power but never developed or realised into an unitive truth and too often at the mercy of human self-projection. Paganism creates 'gods' in the image of Man – depraved, dissolute, capricious. The true Faith proclaims that Man is made in the image of God, capable, through Christ of redemption and eternity.

'so loved the world'- the passionless automaton, the blind watchmaker who wound up the universe and walked away is not the God we know. His love for His creation is because He is creator. That love speaks of the infinite and eternal capacity for relationship, within the Godhead Himself in Trinity and with His fallen creature, Man.

‘that He gave’ - God is generous. This is not a quid pro quo. We give gifts to delight, to enhance, to show our love. God’s gift is not only our existence but His very self.

‘His only-begotten Son’ – the gift of Himself in His Son, utterly unique. Unrepeatable. The Word behind the creation of all things placed into our humanity. This is no distant arbiter of humanity’s fate but God ‘up close and personal’, reaching out to Man in the very fabric of his being and everyday life.

‘that whosoever’ - this is not salvation by caste or class or power or knowledge or birth or race or intellect. ‘Whosoever’ – the invitation is universal, catholic.

‘believes in Him’ – the criterion of that relationship is absolute love and trust, nothing more, nothing less. We can have a personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus. That is why He came.

‘should not perish’ - that relationship overturns the mortal destiny of Man. The dust that must return to dust does not end there in the flames of the crematorium or the wholesome earth of an English field.

‘but have everlasting life’ – the fragile death- bound sinful journey of Man is transformed in Christ. In taking on our humanity He has invited us into His divinity and abolished the tyranny of time in His eternity.

This is the God in whom we believe. This is the God worshipped at our altars. There is no higher revelation of God to Man, nor ever can be, than Christ Jesus.

So when people challenge you with some hoary old misrepresentation of God and say: 'Do you really believe that?'

You can say, 'NO' – but I do believe this:

'God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

and, you can add, I have personally known His love and mercy.

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