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Lent 3C

Sermon notes on Psalm 63.1-8

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"Preaching to the diverted"

Next week brings to town the 2010 Global Atheist Convention! It promises to be a noisy time, if not necessarily a particularly interesting one. It will be noisy because the list of speakers coming to town is a very impressive one, and so we will hear a lot about what "Professor so-and-so said in his address today", and probably not a little of the responses from "the religious".

But I suspect that, if noisy, it will not be a very *interesting* time because, if what is presented bears any semblance to what we have heard lately in the popular media and in the flurry of atheistic publications over the last few years, there's not much which will be said which will threaten to get to the heart of the matter. Getting to the heart of the matter is always a threatening thing, but it is in fact a very difficult thing to manage.

It is rather a pity that the mountain will likely be found so strenuously to have laboured and yet to have brought forth only a mouse. If I might dare to characterise before the event what I expect will take place, next weekend's lectures and addresses will largely be a "preaching to the diverted", which is a thought to which I'll return a little later.

But first we'll take a lead from our psalm for this morning – Psalm 63. Our poet writes, "In the shadow of your wings, I will sing for joy..." (v.7).

The image is that of a chick crouching in under its mother's wings, safe and secure, chirping away happily!!! The writer speaks of his own need for security, and that he finds it in God: "my soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me" (v.8).

But with the loveliness of the image comes the related assertion that human beings have about them a frailty, and a *need* for such support and nourishment. And here we meet one of the central points of contention in belief-unbelief debate. *Does* the human being need God? The gospel reading for next week is that of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32), a story we can understand to tell us something about *not* depending on God: A man had two sons. One asks for his inheritance before time. In the culture of the day what this son effectively declares is shocking: "Father, I wish you were dead". It might be possible to moralise the parable along the lines of our need for God, in

that the son comes limping home again to his father. But the point of the story is the love of the father, which would have been undiminished had the younger son managed actually to do quite well for himself and *not* needed to return home again.

Yet, at the same time, the story of the son who leaves home – for better or for worse – *is*, in a sense, the story of the modern Western world. We have taken leave of God, and wandered to the far country. The question is, do we have what it takes to do well there, or will we find ourselves eating the pigs' swill and wondering if it is possible to go home again?

The rabidly anti-Christian philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, while he was anti-Christian and anti-God, at least had clear understanding of what it would mean to get rid of God – and rather more so than that in the minds of most of today's anti-religious. A few years back I read out in this place a little parable Nietzsche wrote about the dawn of the new age of godlessness. It is important, because in it the arch-atheist declares that atheism is too difficult, that it is as yet beyond human beings as we currently are – not because there actually is a god, but because we don't have the courage for there not to be one. And so we'll hear part of it again this morning:

(THE MADMAN)

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"

As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*--- you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing

in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning?

...Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? ... "

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars---and yet they have done it themselves...¹

The madman is mad not because he declares the death of God, but because he lights a lantern in the bright morning light. "The bright morning light" is the age of enlightened thinking which has concluded that there is no God, or no longer a need for God, and so declares God to be dead. But the madman sees what the jovial non-believers do not: what it would mean for there to be no God, for there only to be human beings who, having done away with God, must now take his place. Though the dawn has come, the madman lights his lantern to show that the mockers are still benighted – still unable to grasp what must now happen.

It is one thing to mock belief and the gods, or to locate in them the sources for all which ails us as a species. There is indeed much to make fun of, and much blame to be laid at the feet of religious belief and politics. But it is quite another thing to deal with ourselves and each other in a world in which there are no longer gods and their followers to blame for whatever goes wrong. Do we actually have it in ourselves to become Gods? It is this question which brings the madman's listeners to stunned silence, for it is implied that *their* answer, at least, as self-avowed atheists, was *No* – it is too much. And so the "madman" declares that he has come too soon.

Do we actually have it in ourselves to become Gods? Unless *this* is the question, then anything which seeks to be atheism is simply a *diversion* – a mocking which misplaces the problem and imagines that if only God would go away we'd get along with each other just fine. For while it might seem that we can think ourselves out of God, we can't think ourselves out of ourselves. The absence of God will not be the presence of

human harmony because getting rid of God will not get rid of our fear of each other, or our frailty in the face of nature, or our deluded sense of self-importance.

If Nietzsche's madman was sceptical of our capacity to live without God, the prospect he declares is nevertheless a horrific one to be alone with each other – not just the people we like but everyone: to have to adjudicate, to balance, to justify. At stake in all this is not only "God" but also humanity. Belief and unbelief are not merely religious questions but also political ones – to do with our living together. The irony is that, while much argument about the existence of God has revolved around whether or not we need God to ground the moral law, in the absence of God (the "Christian" God[!], at least) *all we have* is the law – and we see day by day how poorly the law does at keeping the peace and bringing justice to all who seek it. And we've no reason to imagine that the golden rule – "the one who has the gold makes the rules" – will not continue to apply exactly as it does while the gods are still with us.

Whether we – and they – like it or not, believers and non-believers have the same problem, which we experience first not as God, but in our relationships to other human beings. When the spirit of the psalmist thirsts and his flesh faints, it is not for a religious experience but on account of what has been done to him by others. He hungers and thirsts for a safe place, for a setting right of his relationships. But in this not only does he cling to God, but he finds that God has clung onto him also: the protective wing overshadows him, he is upheld in God's hand.

What ails us as human beings is not "God" as such, but the absence of a story which both *calls* us to love – which is too hard – while also *bringing that love to us*. Such a story is what our poet knows. He lives in the midst of the great struggles which are human existence, and yet finds hope which doesn't lift him out of them, but gives him strength to endure, and strength to love. Believing or not believing, this strength is what all God's children need. By the grace of God, may more and more discover it in his love. Amen.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887) para. 125; Walter Kaufmann ed. (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp.181-82. A few lines have been omitted for brevity; the full text can easily be found online.