‘DECET ERGO PASSET’

A retreat leader tossed this Latin tag at me when I pointed out to her that there was no scriptural warrant for something she seemed to take for granted as true. ‘Decetl is the Latin verb from which we get our word ‘Decent;’ and ‘Passet’ simply means ‘It came to pass – it happened.’ The translation my terrier-like guide gave me was: It ought to have happened; therefore it did.’

When we’re foolhardy enough to search the ways of God despite three thousand years of theology and a 20th century’s quest for the ‘historic Jesus,’ perhaps it’s worth keeping the sense behind this staying in a safe place where we can find it. My own take on it might have been something like this: ‘In God’s economy there seems no reason why this could not have occurred.’ On the other hand, surely our take on the economy we humans have created out of God’s ample provisions for our mutual co-operation and prosperity must conclude that tragedies such as our present pandemic were all but inevitable, but It’s normal in times like these, for some crank – hopefully not a Bishop this time – to proclaim that what is happening in our world is God’s punishment for our sins and derelictions, harking back, of course, to some of the harsher prophetic warnings in the old testament.

If God punishes humankind in this way, we might ask such Christians why Christ died at all. Wasn’t it God’s intention to free us by means of the cross, from the guilt and self-loathing that so often hold us back from being our best selves: otherwise, if grace is so conditional is it grace at all? Modern Christian apologists confronted with a generation of morally upright but incredulous people asking how we could possibly believe in a God like that, are likely to reply that we ourselves don’t believe in such a God either.

The reality that many thoughtful people may in some way experience this pandemic as a call to repentance is surely a matter of philosophy and not the monopoly of religion, but isn’t the question at the heart of Good Friday and of this pandemic the same: ‘Even if we accept that it was in no way pre-ordained by God, how could this have happened, and could it possibly have been avoided.

For want of a better image, I recall launching myself as a child from the top of a slide in the park. During the first couple of seconds, it might have been possible to halt my journey to the bottom, but thereafter things took their inevitable course. If the incredulous seekers after truth ask how God could allow such disasters as this one and others to happen, we might be discrete enough to answer that God intends and facilitates the good where and whenever he can, without ever going so far as to contravene the free will with which he has entrusted us as his agents.

And what of this peculiar notion that in order to show mercy to the rest of us, God needed to subject ‘His only Son’ to the most agonising, shaming ordeal and public execution? Among others, the leading theologian and Bible scholar Marcus Bourg, with all due respect to fellow Christians, describes the theory of substitutional atonement as bad theology and bad history. God cannot possibly will the execution of a just and righteous man. He goes on to assert that events could, indeed, have turned out differently; either that Jesus could have chosen to make himself scarce as he had on previous occasions, or that the temple authorities could have had him bumped off quietly or even stoned to death like Stephen. The fact that Jesus came to accept that this was the point in time at which he was to meet His death does not mean that this moment was pre-ordained by God.

Rowan Williams speaks of Christians living, as it were, in the land of Easter Saturday; that is in the space between ‘My God, why have you forsaken me,’ and the joy of resurrection. Whilst Bible commentators remind us that these bleakest words of Jesus are those that open Psalm 22, which goes on to affirm trust in God’s mercy and providence. The implication is that the son of God – the perfect sinless human being, couldn’t possibly have suffered the depths of depression expressed so meaningfully for instance, in the sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins. If it is truly the case that Jesus was in some way protected from descent into the deepest pit of despair, we might be justified in asking ourselves how His life could possibly serve as a true pattern for our own.

Neither does modern psychology necessarily help us, when a clearly wise and competent Catholic Psychiatrist like Dr Jack Dominion can fit the life of Jesus into a model exemplar of perfect mental development when it’s plain from clues in the Gospel that much of his inner strength must have come from dealing with childhood disadvantages and family in-fighting, it becomes clear that the life of Jesus has fallen from one paradigm of piety into another.

Trying to strip our understanding of Jesus’ life of these pieties has the potential either to open up the ground from underneath our ‘hind’s feet,’ or, alternatively, to open before and around us a whole new vista of hope and freedom. If Jesus’ life was a matter of free choice to be directed by God rather than that of a holy automaton, then it truly does serve as a pattern for our own. If, for example, he had come into the world ‘emptied’ completely of God’s foreknowledge, and all the other attributes of God as we seek to understand him, then he comes on truly equal terms as our brother; and, like him, the rest is up to us.

What strengthens my own conviction that this may be so derived from the pig’s breakfast Samson makes of God’s purpose for his life as recounted in the book of Judges. There are enough paintings of Samson and Delilah not to have to remind us how the story ends, but at the beginning he is clearly set apart by God as one of the three’ Nazarites’ in the bible, alongside the prophets Samuel and John the Baptist. In a life of total self-will, Samson misuses every gift God gave him to the extent that enslavement to his passions brings about his inevitable capture and humiliation. The world is as it is, and God, true to himself, holds what he loves with an open hand, but surely grieves that his gift has been so abused.

So God equips the human Jesus with gifts he hopes and trusts will be sufficient for his purposes. What might some of these gifts have been?

Let’s start with what we can reasonably deduce. Firstly that not only could his voice carry, but that he could hold a large crowd for hours: not only that he had a ready wit and a sense of humour, but that he was a welcome guest and an attractive and loyal friend: not only that he must have been an Alpha male with strength and physical presence, but that he was fit enough to survive beatings and abuse from the temple guard; from Pilate’s soldiers; a Roman flogging, from which many victims went mad; and yet he was still able to carry his cross part of the way to Calvary, and, presumably, after the three falls of tradition, to arrive just about on his feet. If the commander of his torture detachment was surprised that Jesus had died so quickly on the cross, he needn’t have been.

What else might Jesus have discovered? However we read and seek to understand the Gospels, it is clear that, in response to Jesus’ steady and faithful pursuit of God’s will, it seems to have been revealed to him in discernible stages; firstly through his relationship with his cousin and mentor, the Baptist; through his own baptism; and the sense of purpose he gained through battling with his realisation that, perhaps as a prophet, there may have been short-cuts available to him by which he could manipulate the powers that be into his sphere of influence. We can also deduce that the arrest and imprisonment of John had a profound effect on Jesus; it’s not until now that He goes into public ministry on His own. He learned, as Tom wright makes clear, that He would have to find a narrow path between affirming and supporting His people, whilst avoiding, where possible, the kind of proclamation that had led to John’s arrest: He knew that the way of the prophets of old couldn’t work in the situation in which his countrymen found themselves under Roman rule.

His resolution to target and minister to the poor and marginalised of his society proved to be not only morally preferable, but practically helpful to his cause. When we sing John Ireland’s luminous hymn we are unaware, as was the poet, that the crowd who ‘strew his way’ to Jerusalem could not possibly have been the same rent-a-crowd that made it into the courtyard of Pilate’s palace clamouring for his crucifixion. He couldn’t possibly have ‘cleansed the temple’ on his own, without moral support, at least, from the on-lookers, otherwise he’d have been arrested on the spot.

What really interests me, though, is how Jesus may have discovered the extent of his ability to heal. We get a clue in the story of the woman with the vaginal issue: He is aware of ‘power’ leaving him, which indicates that each individual act of healing he performed cost him something, rather than that he simply tapped into some endless supernatural magic. We can also deduce that, whilst his abilities in this regard were clearly in a class of their own, other people past and present were also able to heal. If we understand the essence of faith as being risk, it’s also worth asking ourselves to what extent Jesus may have actually been able to foresee the result of his exertions: how sure could he really be that his prayers to raise the dead would be answered.

Now, here we find him on this Good Friday; passionate about life and anxious about his legacy; an Alpha male beaten and broken; forsaken by his disciples; nailed all but naked to a cross and publicly ridiculed; how can we believe that he could have been entirely certain of the outcome of it all from where he was? He, of all people, understood that the essence of faith is, indeed, risk; and the necessary grit in the oyster is doubt.

Even at his lowest ebb, however, and to the very end of his human existence, love and humanity were Jesus’ stock-in-trade. Theologians – at least the one who trained my year – seem afraid of the beautifully shining prospect that Jesus may have died, not to seal some kind of theologically-designed covenant but that perhaps he simply came to earth, took up his ministry, healed and restored the sick in body and mind, and tried to teach the world through the pattern of his life, and the nature of his death, that there is a way of living together under God’s loving purposes, freed from the traditional fear of his vengeful anger, and released into becoming the best versions of ourselves that we can be, however limiting and apparently insignificant we may feel ourselves to be in the world’s estimation. What’s more, it may just be that the kind of Kingdom Jesus envisaged may not be a million miles away, in spirit, from what we are all in process of constructing here and now under the lash of Coronavirus, among people of all faiths and none; truly the world turned upside-down!

The message of Easter is: DECET ERGO PASSERIT – ‘IT SHOULD HAPPPEN; THEREFORE IT WILL’

**PRAYER**  ‘The language God uses is silence

Any other is a bad translation.’