

**ST EDMUNDSBURY CATHEDRAL**  
**HOLY WEEK 2017**  
**Addresses given by Canon Angela Tilby**  
***Services of Compline***  
***Monday 10 – Wednesday 22 April 2017***

**ADDRESS ONE: GOD IS NOT A THING**

A contemporary theologian has said that the people who best understand the cross are atheists. For them it is a perfect example of the way the world is, because it shows how the innocent – Jesus in this case – are judged guilty, and the violent get what they want. In a godless and ultimately meaningless world such injustice comes as no surprise.

But if that is all there is to say, we might as well go home tonight and forget about Good Friday and Easter, perhaps making an exception to allow us to consume chocolate dinosaurs next weekend.

The death of Jesus on the cross has haunted the Christian imagination through the centuries. It is obviously a story of injustice; the innocent Jesus is betrayed, tried and executed for a variety of reasons; jealousy, spite, and because of unproven claims that he was a threat to public order. But Christians have never seen that as the end of his story. The events of Easter gave them an interpretation of the death of Jesus which is startling. Jesus returns from death not to bring vengeance on his enemies, but with forgiveness and hope. And so the cross came to be seen an expression not only of human violence but also of divine love.

For Christians the cross demonstrates that the world is, in fact, a good world, a just world and that even where it goes wrong, it is ultimately sustained and upheld by sacrificial love. That is a big claim. A claim which many, as we all know, find simply incredible. I am not going to attempt to defend the Christian faith in all its subtlety and complexity in these the three addresses. My concern is more with the tide of scepticism which makes our ancient faith difficult for people today. I want to prod at some aspects of contemporary atheism to see how robust they really are in their claim to have dismissed the Christian faith. This will lead us eventually into Holy Week, but I want to start tonight with belief in God itself.

There is no denying that belief in God appears to be in decline in this country. All the mainstream churches have falling numbers. Some of you will quietly mourn the fact that your children seem to do OK without God; you wince slightly at the mockery of God and religion in general in the media. And you might even wonder whether those hard headed atheists who claim science has abolished God might not be right.

To begin with that last point. I once found myself in a radio studio opposite one of those hard headed public atheists; and found myself looking into the icy blue eyes of a total fanatic; incapable of moderation and reasoned argument. I did what many of us who have been brought up to be polite might do, I smiled, I laughed a little, I tried to appease. I knew I could never be as rude about his unbelief as he was being about what he presumed were my beliefs. *Presumed* is the right word here, because I quickly realised that he had me signed up for beliefs which I did not hold, and which were a caricature of those I did.

That incident and others have made me realise that the atheism espoused by the chattering classes: media people, academics and so on, is not quite what it seems to be. They say, of course, that atheism has scientific roots. It stands for reason against emotion, for dispassionate enquiry instead of prejudice, for beliefs based on evidence instead of the unproven assertions of faith. But if you explore a little more deeply you quickly find that this atheism is too often based on a caricature of what religious people have always believed God to be. The God atheists want to abolish is a bit of a bully, an incompetent creator who has landed us in a cruel world full of arbitrary rules. We might agree with them that the sooner we get rid of this old tyrant, the better.

The problem is that the God atheists want to abolish is not the God that most thoughtful people of faith believe in. There is an extraordinary consensus among believers of all faiths about the nature of God and it isn't the god of the atheists. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, and up to a point Buddhists (though they might not use the word God) believe in the oneness, the unity and the transcendence of the divine nature. They don't treat the word 'God' as a proper name like Peter or Anne or even Jesus. In the Old Testament where God discloses himself as Yahweh or Jehovah this is a name which conceals God's mystery, a name must not be said aloud. The four Hebrew letters that spell Yahweh/Jehovah, the letters given to Moses at the burning bush mean 'I am what I am'.

The mystery of God is fundamental. He is not a character who might or might not happen to exist. Yes, in some faiths there are mentions of many gods, but you soon find that these are more like angels than real gods. They are created. They are a part of nature. But God's isn't part of nature. You won't see him if you go into orbit. You won't find him beyond the most distant galaxy or staring up from the heart of a black hole.

In spite of this, God is very much around in people's experience. Many people get a sense of God in the wonder and awe they feel at the inexplicable 'thereness' of things, the sheer gratuity of existence. This wonder is found in all cultures, in all times and in all places. Many children have it and it never quite leaves them. Long before there is debate about whether or not God exists there is this mystical intuition of the divine.

During the scientific revolution pious experimenters and theoreticians tried earnestly to find and explain God and define his role. The problem is that as science came to explain more and more, so God's role got smaller and smaller until God became what has been called 'the God of the gaps'. Today scientists can explain the emergence of our universe in the big bang as the product of entirely natural forces. Because of this some go on to claim that science proves there is no intention behind it all, no plan, everything is the accidental expression of mathematical possibilities. They say that there is no reason why the universe should have produced life, or minds, or morality or music. It just did. And because they have offered advantages to living beings they have continued. This view is what is known as naturalism and it is what most atheists who claim science has abolished God believe.

It could be true. But it is not as obviously true as many people think. This is because it is based on a contradiction. Scientific method relies on evidence and reason, but the evidence that we have taken on its own, leads us not to a greater reason but to unreason. So we reasoning beings have to accept the fact that we live in a universe which rests on blind impersonal laws of mathematics and nothing else. The question of why those laws of mathematics exist and can produce worlds like ours is not solved by simply stating that they do. There remains an itch for a final explanation.

I think it is actually more rational to deduce that existence must rest on something greater than itself, that there is an absolute cause of everything, the ground of being. This is what the word God means in the philosophical tradition of the world's religions. But I would go further than this. This universe has produced minds, like ours, beings who can think and direct their activities to achieve particular ends. Rather than assume that these tendencies emerged by accident, would it not be more rational to suggest that the universe itself is a product of intention; that the ground of the universe is something like *mind*.

That, I would suggest is what classical Christian theology means by God as creator. Science looks at cause and effect, seeks evidence, applies method, declares results. Faith on the other hand has its roots in intuition and operates at the level of the wholeness of things, the unprovable, the irreducible, the sheer *thereness* of everything that is. One of the early Christian theologians, Irenaeus of Lyons, was fighting a battle against heretics called Gnostics, who thought we were trapped in a great chain of matter and needed to be rescued from our bodies and from the world. No, he said, there is no great chain. Our bodies are good, the material world is good. God is where the world is. In other words when we speak of God we are talking about the environment in which everything happens. The God I believe in is immediately and simultaneously present to every particle of creation, every rational thought, every impulse towards the good, the beautiful and the true.

To try to abolish God then runs the risk of rejecting order and meaning and with it the moral framework human beings need in order to thrive and flourish. It also makes room for the projection of sheer will as the fundamental drive of any rational beings this universe has irrationally thrown up. Some might think that would be a secular definition of heaven. But I am not sure that it would not turn out to be a definition of hell. I'll have more to say about that tomorrow night.

## **ADDRESS TWO: GOD AND HUMAN FREEDOM**

I talked yesterday about the current prejudice in society against belief in God, the assumption of many opinion formers that belief in God is irrational and destructive. Get rid of religion, they say, and we shall be free. Historically speaking, they claim, belief in God has imprisoned people in oppressive and inhuman beliefs: it has caused wars, and it has opposed the advance of science and learning. Now a case can certainly be made for some of that. I don't think anyone would doubt that appalling things have been done in the name of God, and still are. Or that religious people can sometimes be blind and wilful. But the argument is not as one sided as it may seem. It is at least probable that the most destructive, unjust and repressive periods in human history were not dominated by religion, but by recent secular ideologies based on a twisted version of evolutionary science. I am thinking of the pagan Third Reich and the atheist Soviet Union under communism.

It is sometimes suggested that we are in the grip of a third oppressive regime, that of global capitalism, which enslaves us to a different kind of ideology, that of consumerism. I am what I buy, or even I shop therefore I am: *Tesco ergo sum*. Whether you believe that or not (and I am mildly sceptical) I do accept that in our age and society freedom is often defined almost exclusively in terms of personal choice. I am free if I can choose. And what do I want to choose? Well, to have what I want and so to choose who I am, to identify myself as I wish. Those are the kind of answers people will often give. They are quite limited of course and reflect the relative affluence of our society and our aspirational longings. If it were not for this good fortune we might think that freedom from poverty, from ignorance and oppression should come first. To even be able to choose what you have for dinner is for many an unthinkable luxury. But I have a particular reason for focusing on the rather individualistic way freedom is often defined because it illustrates one of the things that can happen when a society moves on from belief in God into the core belief that the self has the power to become anything it will.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this core belief. We see it manifested in all kinds of ways. One would be the belief that the whole purpose of life is to do things 'my way', to be the star in my own firmament. Ask a child what they want to be when they grow up and often the answer is 'to be famous'. This is the lure of celebrity culture: Just follow your dream. And many think that way lies fulfilment and happiness.

When the football star George Best died in 2005 some of the tributes to him suggested he had won a kind of victory. He had been himself right up to the end, he had exercised his right to be who he truly was, a hero. It was the same with Amy Winehouse. Few spoke of their lives and deaths in moral terms, or even of addiction and waste because to do so would have been to appear judgmental. And in an age when freedom is defined in terms of individual choice you must never ever judge another person's choice. My choice, my truth, is more important than my or any one else's health or well-being, it is more important even than reason.

It is a duty to do what I want without compromise, and this has further implications. I must avoid any commitment that could prevent me being myself. Any commitments I might make are strictly provisional. One perhaps trivial example of this phobia about commitments is the increasing reluctance people have about answering invitations. Even if they accept an invitation many still feel free to pull out at the last minute or just not turn up at all. My freedom is always more important than any commitment I might already have made. I think it is a similar phenomenon which makes people describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious.' Being spiritual keeps your options open. You don't have to believe or belong if you don't want to, but you can still regard yourself as a thoroughly good person, following your own unique and self-chosen path. No way is better than any other, so why does it matter?

This refusal to discriminate or commit, this insistence on tolerating all choices however destructive or unreasonable suggests that we are in the grip of a kind of moral nihilism. Our refusal to judge might sound compassionate, but it is compassion employed as a mask for indifference. It appears to respect difference but in fact it is *indifferent*. This moral nihilism is, I believe, a reflection of the cosmic nihilism I spoke about yesterday. The ultimate consequence of the abolition of God, as C.S. Lewis said as long ago as 1943, is the abolition of man, humanity. Those who claim that we can understand nature entirely as the product of blind mechanical forces are in the end saying that existence itself is irrational. It rests on nothing. As the physicist Steven Weinberg once said: 'The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless'.

You might think that this moral nihilism grows out of the cosmic nihilism I tried to describe last night, but I wonder whether it isn't the other way round. I suggested yesterday that there is at least a case for saying that cosmic nihilism is actually less rational than theism. Yet theism appears to have lost the argument in our culture, even though it could make rather better sense than atheism. If that is so then perhaps we need to think more critically about why this has happened.

You may have heard the phrase 'God is dead'. That was first articulated by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. What he meant was that the idea of God as the final authority, the ground of public and private morality in society no longer held sway in western culture. Nietzsche recognised, more than most people did, that the death of God as a cultural force would have a devastating affect on all of us. He also predicted that in the absence of God the only meanings possible would be those produced by the naked human will. In a meaningless world, there are no moral restraints. Will alone has its way. Victory goes to the strongest and most determined. The role of the weak is to be defeated again and again and again. Nietzsche welcomed the death of Christianity, which he accused of sentimentality, a religion fit only for slaves. The elevation of the will on the other hand would produce stronger, fitter, human beings, supermen for a super-race. Now it is a long way from the madder shores of Nietzsche's thought to my pondering online whether to pursue a pair of trainers in purple or orange, but the link between them is the elevation of the will as the arbiter of freedom. I choose therefore I am. Freedom is 'I WANT, I WANT IT NOW'.

Nietzsche himself seems to have pondered the likely outcomes of the death of God and to have concluded that the worst outcome would be a society of self-obsessed narcissists concerned only with trivia. He found it difficult to imagine how such a society could ever produce great art, or music, or literature. So, no Michaelangelo, no St Matthew Passion. It is hard to imagine how a society that has deified individual choice as its only measure of freedom could ever call on its members to make sacrifices, to be united in the face of threat, even to protect its weakest and most vulnerable members.

Well, we have not got there yet. But it does seem to me that we are busy spending the endowment of our Christian moral legacy without renewing its capital at the moment and at some point the endowment is going to run out.

There are I believe human freedoms which are only finally secure within an understanding that they are held within the greater freedom of God. In a Christian perspective freedom is much wider than freedom to be whatever I want to be. Freedom is, in fact, a matter less of choice and more of vocation, of becoming who I am through discovery. This is partly my own discovery of course, but it is also a discovery of what it is that others call out of me. What do others see in me, what do they ask of me? And how do I respond to that? Ultimately it is about who I am in God, in a God who calls me, to be both less and more than the self I thought I was. Less in the self that I am not the centre of the universe. In fact I depend on others all the time. And I owe to others more than I often recognise. And all of us are ultimately dependent, fleeting souls in this vale of tears.

But I am also more than the self I thought I was. I find, as I begin to trust God and respond to him, that he has given me a capacity to receive him, to know something of him, to trust him for my infinite good. He gives me a way of evaluating my choices, of being free from whims and uncontrolled impulses and destructive desires. So that on the one hand I am nothing more than a child of chance and time and the dust of the universe; but I am also as the Prayer Book Catechism puts it, a child of God, a member of Christ and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

### THIRD ADDRESS – GOD AND GOD’S IMAGE

As a contributor to the BBC’s *Thought for the Day* I was partly ashamed, partly amused some years ago to find my occasional ‘thoughts’ subject to an online parody, courtesy of *The Freethinker*, ‘the voice of atheism since 1881’. It was called *Platitude for the Day* and all of us who contributed to the slot found ourselves mercilessly and sometimes rather brilliantly mocked. Oh dear. Well I dare say it was good for us!

But it also made me reflect on the tolerance and inclusiveness of the editorial line of *Thought for the Day*. Those of us who contribute are constantly reminded by the producers to be aware of the sensitivities of other faiths, and not to cause offence to non-believers; humanists and secularists. This means that you tend to fall back on a few basic theological ideas, favouring those which can be shown to have been truly and obviously beneficial to the whole of society. One of those is the belief that human beings are made in the image of God. The value of this belief is that because it asserts that all people are of equal dignity and worth in God’s eyes it implies that we should treat one another as being of equal worth and dignity. It is not difficult to see how deeply embedded the ethical consequences of that belief still are in our culture. The belief has parallels in other faith traditions; its ethical consequences are usually accepted by humanists and most secularists.

What we have yet to discover is how long the consequences of the belief that humans are in the image of God can outlast the loss of the original belief. Because obviously, the image of God is a meaningless concept without God.

I think this is not always realised. Some at least of those who argue that belief in God is bad for us, also blithely assume that it is simply self-evident that we should treat each other as being equal in worth and dignity. Human rights, they would say, are fundamental. They don’t need to be grounded in any transcendent source.

I have to say I find this optimism utterly irrational. Without faith in a God who created us equal there is no fundamental reason why we should treat each other as equal. It is not self-evident at all, apart from the fact that it is part of that moral endowment from the age of faith which has hung on through the age of reason, and still persists today, in an age which may turn out to be an age of *unreason*.

Outside the framework given by belief you have to find some very good reasons for believing in universal human rights, and it is not altogether clear what those would be, let alone what might distinguish them from animal rights, or even the rights of plants, or come to that, destructive parasites and viruses.

If sheer human will is the decisive factor in human affairs, as the philosopher Nietzsche argued, it might be thought more logical to abandon belief in human equality and dignity, and to actively discriminate; to prefer the intelligent to the intellectually challenged; the able bodied to the disabled, the rich to the poor, the powerful to the weak.

This is where Christianity matters. I think we need to recognise that Christianity brought into the world something new, a positive revolution in human thought. It is important to grasp this because so many of the movements towards equality and dignity in our contemporary world are actually grounded in Christian views of the human person. The ancient world, the world into which Christianity emerged, did not see human beings as of equal worth. Ancient culture saw the world as a hierarchy in which everyone had their proper place. You might be the emperor, or you might be a wretched slave. You had no choice in the matter. Your role was allocated by fate, or by the will of the gods. The whole system, divine and human, natural and supernatural fitted together like cogs in a wheel, bound together by necessity, the absolute need for order. But this order was always fragile. It needed the force of convention and religion and law to keep it going. The gods had to be respected, and so did human authority. Respect for the gods and for rulers - their human representatives - was demonstrated by sacrifice. Humans too must show their piety by loyalty and gratitude to those set over them. The greatest threat to society was chaos. To promote any kind of disorder was not only immoral and anti-social, it was also the worst possible blasphemy against the gods.

The pagan Roman world into which Christianity emerged was suffused with a noble, almost heroic sadness. There was no escape, the best anyone could ever do was to accept their god-given fate within the system. Nature was both beautiful and terrible and humans were part of nature, striving for survival, hoping that their lives might be touched by a moment of glory and prestige.

In such a world the Christian Gospel was worse than a scandal. It was a moral insurrection, a challenge to the whole order on which society was based. The Christians, after all, worshipped a crucified carpenter, who had hung about with people who were outside the system altogether; those with sickening illnesses, the mad, the immoral. No wonder Christianity was seen by its first critics as a contagion to be suppressed. Christians refused to worship the gods, they wouldn't even perform the little acts of loyalty, like burning a few grains of incense to the emperor as the guardian of earthly and heavenly order. Instead of a noble sadness they embraced something unheard of, real joy, laughter, confidence in the face of persecution and death.

Instead of passively accepting their role, they treasured their baptism which brought them into a community which refused to discriminate between rich and poor, male and female, slave and free. It is difficult for us to imagine this now; the astonishing sense of gratitude and freedom that Christian baptism conferred. So much that it was thought worth the terrible risks of persecution and the rejection of family and friends.

The difference between Christianity and the paganism it gradually replaced came home to me once when I was looking at the carvings of the victory column in Rome dedicated to the emperor Marcus Aurelius. They showed the Roman army defeating enemies who were threatening the borders of the empire, but the battlefield is dominated by the image of the rain-god, a brooding figure with heavy dripping wings outstretched over the fallen, menace in his eyes and crushing defeat in the fallen bodies and twisted limbs. Marcus Aurelius was one

of the best of the Roman emperors, a thoughtful Stoic, a dignified, dutiful leader, who mediated regularly and even kept a spiritual journal. But in the end he thought there was little consequence in human action, all things would pass, there was no ultimate hope or meaning, no final awakening from the sleep of death, only the relief that pain and decision and endurance was over. Compare that Roman battlefield with early images taken from Christian tombs. Images of Jesus healing the sick restoring sight to the blind, raising the dead. And always doing so by reaching out and touching, flesh to flesh, the healing hand, the embrace. This is the testament to what Christianity brought into the world. God had come down to us in the flesh to bring healing and knowledge and hope; to restore and renew human life; not out of necessity, but out of sheer gratuitous love.

Christian life is not an idea, or a concept, but life passed on from person to person to person. And eventually over five hundred years the Christian message prevailed. Of course it did not bring an end to unfairness or oppression, or even persecution: Christians were every bit as capable of that as their pagan forebears. But it did bring into the world a radically different view of human dignity. For the first time slaves began to be thought of as real people; you can see the implications of that just beginning to play out in the New Testament. It also became possible to question authority in a new way, to challenge the rich and powerful to act with humility. It became possible for some of those born into poverty to acquire an education – they would never have had a chance under the old system. Christians visited the sick and offered poor relief and founded hospitals. Once the idea had taken root that God had come to us in the humanity of Christ; it changed our view of humanity. The human body, the human mind were now the dwelling place of God, and in our baptism we were restored to that divine image in which we were once created.

Once you grasp that, and of course it has taken centuries for Christians and others to begin to grasp it, human beings can no longer be treated as things, disposed of as obstacles, written off as enemies. Each person is precious beyond price, unique to God and uniquely loved by God.

Without God ascribing such value to human beings our ultimate convictions about human worth rest on surprisingly shaky ground. Of course, we still honour human beings and try to live by the ethic derived from our inherited belief. But I think we are already beginning to see how our assumptions about human dignity can be slowly be chipped away once the undergirding conviction that they always rested on has died. It does not take much for some people's lives to become less valuable than others. It does not take much for us to prevent the births of those we consider less human, to encourage the deaths of those we believe less worthy of life. We are parasites on our Christian past. For the time being the legacy holds, but we can't know for how long. Meanwhile we look to a future which may be noble in all kinds of ways, full of new discoveries and inventions; but like the ancient past from which the Christian faith delivered us, may also turn out to be terribly sad.