

Along the track

Faith and Silence of God

The Irish poet Antony Raftery said that, after all his ramblings, whenever he went back to Mayo where he came from, he would sit down among his own people and he would 'become young again'.

In those few words he paints a wonderful image, perhaps an idealised picture but nonetheless... Sometimes we yearn for those days when we were young. For most of us, I guess things seemed so much simpler then, more certain, safer perhaps, at least more secure, less complicated. It wasn't as if we did not wonder, question, dream of bigger and better things but the ups and downs of life were still to come. God was in his heaven and all was right with the world (*Pippa Passes*, Robert Browning 1841).

Wisdom doesn't always come with age but, as we grow older, as life becomes more complex and challenging, there are times when we may feel that God may not always be in heaven or even close by and all may not be right with the world. Not so long ago, visiting Czech theologian and philosopher Monsignor Tomas Halik was interviewed on National Radio. Halik said:

I was telling the seminarians yesterday that in every believer is a hidden atheist, and in every atheist is also a hidden believer. We must accept the shadow side of our personality, the other one in us. I'm always telling to my students before their spiritual retreat, you must invite the pagan, the doubter, the sinner in you to this house. Sometimes we leave this sinner, this unbeliever, this doubter, outside a church and then we enjoy our nice Sunday inside, we enjoy the silence and all this pious preaching. But after this time the unbeliever in us is waiting, so sometimes we must accept this troubled person inside of us, because Jesus is not so interested in our pious side, he came for the sinners, he came for the doubters, he came for the seekers, he came for the lost ones.

At various times in life, the unbeliever in us is waiting, when we think God is absent, when God is silent, no longer listening. That can happen because of some personal tragedy or just that things we once held to be true or helpful don't seem to make much sense anymore. When we look at the pain and suffering throughout the world, for example, the wars and senseless violence, injustice, the millions of homeless who have lost all hope, we may well ask "how could God let this happen?" Some ask the same question when confronted with the sexual abuse crisis. We can be tempted to conclude God does not exist. Many do.

Questioning or rejecting God's existence can happen more easily when God does not do things the way we think they ought to be done, when God does not live up to the image we have constructed. It happens more easily when we see faith simply as acceptance of doctrine and formulas, both of which are important in trying to describe what we have discovered about God and God's ways. That is their purpose. But when something happens that makes us

question them, the framework we had constructed falls apart. But faith is deeper than formulas (CCC #170), it is rather a process of discovery, a process towards maturity in our relationship with God and committing ourselves to action.

Throughout history there have been people known as 'mystics'. Some of the Christian mystics, like St John of the Cross, St Therese of Lisieux for example, Hildegard of Bingen, Bernard of Clairvaux have written of the hiddenness of God, or the dark night of faith, the absence of God. They wrote of the importance of 'dark nights' in coming to realise that faith is a dynamic process, a process of maturing. They came to experience God in what appeared to be God's absence, when they felt abandoned or they simply did not understand or were confounded by what was happening around them. Despite this, they remained open to God, not in ways that they thought God should look like or be like, but they found God even in the world of poverty and suffering, tragedy and hardship, where God seemed to be absent. They found themselves called on to think in new ways, to act in new ways.

The experience of the silence of God offers a choice – rejection of God or the opportunity to go deeper, to seek a more mature faith. That may give us a deeper sense of purpose or connectedness with others and a realisation that faith is exploring questions with courage, openness and honesty and not just relying on the formulas which endeavour to explain our faith. It means being open to the insights, the discoveries and the wisdom of others, maybe to think in new ways.

Thomas Halik again:

There are many people, they have their life in the style of monologue, just to seek their own ideas, their own goals without listening [to] others. I think it's very sad to have this life as a monologue. Life as a dialogue is, for me, the basis of religious faith. For me, faith is life in the style of dialogue, listening and answering, giving a response, taking responsibility.

And, like the mystics, persevering in prayer, even when that appeared fruitless.

For those who struggle and sometimes find they cannot believe, it is worth remembering that on the verge of her death, for St Therese of Lisieux God appeared terribly distant and she experienced only emptiness, she had 'lost' her faith, all her certainty. But even then, she says she was now capable of 'only loving.'

Jesus came for the doubters, for the seekers, for those who felt lost and alone. And stayed with them!

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au