

IT'LL BE ALL RIGHT

Sung Eucharist

St Michael Cornhill

Trinity II

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Many years ago now – I think in about 1970 – Peter Berger, still today, one of the doyens of the ‘sociology of religion’ wrote a marvellous book, which he called simply, *A Rumour of Angels*. In my book, it remains a milestone, a classic for those of us who believe. Berger was brought up, I think, as an American Lutheran. His university training and subsequent intellectual development took him out of the realm of believers into the realm of sceptics. This journey had been encouraged by sociology’s and the sociologist’s tendency towards relativism. In other words, there are no ‘objective’ truths. Any statement, any view of life simply stands alongside all other views. Any of them is as credible as any other. You pay your money and you take your choice.

This pattern of thought is hardly new. It reaches back to the philosophers of ancient Greece. Protagoras commented famously ‘Man is the measure of all things.’ Your truth is just as valid as mine and vice versa. Some years on in his career, however, saw Berger taking a second glance at all this. There was a variety of reasons for this. One of them may have been the moral reason.

Let me explain a little more. In 1789, the French Revolution detached cultural and intellectual thought entirely from theology and the Church. That was understandable – the Church in France had been corrupt in many ways. However, this process went still further and detached morality from any *objective* base. Morality is man-made – we can each choose our own. The impact of this was devastating. It issued in the reign of terror with a series of régimes eventually leading to the bloodbath of the Vendée in western France. It was this that caused Edmund Burke to nuance his hitherto ‘liberal’ approach to politics. There were no firm anchorages left either for morality or political life.

Berger reflected similarly, but, more positively, he became clear that there is something, someone who transcends our humanity. He began to talk of ‘signals of transcendence’, signals that God still reigns. He gave five broad examples, but I’ll only bother you with one for now. It is the signal of faithfulness, reliability, ultimate security. He gives the example of a mother hearing her young child caught up in uncontrollable sobbing. She goes into the child’s bedroom, picks him up, embraces and kisses him. ‘There, there’, she says, ‘It’ll be all right, everything’s going to be all right.’ Berger comments that this is no cynical or shallow assurance. The mother believes this from the bottom of her heart.

This is perhaps one of the most significant elements within the Christian faith. It’s the assumption that God will never let us down. This is drawn out in the most tender of stories in our first reading. The prophet Elijah is in the wilderness in days of famine. The Lord sends Elijah to Zaraphath, to a widow whom he promises will feed him. The widow too is terrified of the famine. She has virtually nothing left for herself or for her son. But Elijah tells her of the promise from God. Neither the barrel of meal, nor the cruse of oil will run out, and nor do they. The story is followed by the sequel of the son falling ill and dying and Elijah, through God’s grace breathing life back into the child. ‘It was *all right*.’

The gospel reading picks up what is almost a parallel story - of Jesus and the widow at Nain. Again her son had died, and Jesus brings new life to him. ‘It was, ultimately, *all right*.’ The epistle reading is rather different but again it reminds us of God’s faithfulness with Paul. Despite all Paul had done to attack the Christian community, still God’s faithfulness prevails and Paul is

embraced by God's love made known in Jesus. He becomes one of the most courageous and also one of the most intelligent of all the early apostles for the Christian faith.

This message of ultimate love and faithfulness offers an essential framework for our belief in the face of sometimes unutterable tragedy and pain. Everyone of us will have experienced – either for ourselves, or through the suffering of others – the acute nature of those most perilous moments of our lives. Some of these crises will be provoked by our own human fallibility – sometimes by us ourselves, sometimes through the selfishness or lack of care of others. But also there are natural tragedies – earthquakes in the West Indies, tsunamis in the Indian Ocean.

Beneath all this, however, we still believe that underneath are one the everlasting arms of God in Christ. At times, we shall be incapable of offering an 'explanation', but at root in all this we still believe that we live in a world where our ultimate good is promised despite all suffering and tragedy. As with that woman comforting her baby, we believe ultimately that it will be *all right*.

During Holy Week, we read that passage from *Lamentations*, which we rarely hear elsewhere in the year. It runs like this: 'The steadfast love of the lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is thy faithfulness.' God's mercy is unbounded. Pope Francis has declared this year 'A Year of Mercy'. In doing so he touches upon one of our key beliefs. Our God is a merciful God. We should show mercy to others as God shows mercy to us. In the hours before his trial and death, Jesus endures agony. On the cross we even hear him reciting Psalm 22, 'My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken me?' But, of course, the dénouement is that God does *not* forsake Jesus. It is in this that we ground our hope that 'It' will be *all right*. Everything's going to be all right.'

I'd guess that in a world as uncertain as ours this is one of the essential messages from the gospel which we can pass on. Elijah and the child, Jesus and the widow of Nain's son were still in God's arms. 'It was all right.'

Amen.

Readings

IKings. 17. 8-16.

Galatians. 1. 11-24.

Luke. 7. 11-17.