

## Second Sunday of Creationtide: St Thomas-on-The Bourne. September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Ambrose Fleury is a wonderfully eccentric character in a French novel by Romain Gary. Ambrose is a kite maker and the designs for his kites are based on great people in French history...so he creates kites named Napoleon, Voltaire, and so on. During the Second World War his village in Normandy is occupied by the Nazis. They order that his kites can only be flown to a limited height because they think he might be using them to signal to the Resistance. Well, one day he hears there has been a roundup of all the Jews in one part of Paris. They were taken to a velodrome near the Eiffel Tower and then were deported to Auschwitz. Ambrose the kite maker was so appalled by this that he made seven yellow kites in the form of Jewish stars and then flew them above his village. He was arrested by the Nazis and imprisoned. His nephew, a dreamy young man, tried to work out what it was about the Nazis that was so twisted...and then it came to him. 'The Nazis were human beings. And the thing that was human about them was their inhumanity...' (p 227. The Kites. Romain Gary.)

It is a sobering way of describing the human propensity for evil.

We are in the season of Creation-tide which celebrates the beauty of the earth and the necessity for us to steward it. That is absolutely right...but creation, I'm afraid, also includes the Nazis, child abusers, torturers, bullies, and psychopaths.

And as if that weren't enough, think of other aspects of creation which are not beautiful: the cuckoo that lays its eggs in another bird's nest; or, dolphins which can gang up on a porpoise tossing it around between themselves until it is dead; or, the fox that bites off the heads of all the chickens in the chicken coop, but leaves the bodies. Creation can be, and often is, nasty and brutal...not beautiful at all.

Theologically, what are we to make of a world, including our fellow humans, which is both utterly beautiful and also utterly cruel?

If there is no God, then there is no problem: life is just as it is, and we have to get on with it. But if God is Creator and is good... we are forced to ask: who or what is the cause of the horrors of creation?

Let's consider two answers from outside Christianity to that moral problem. First answer: in Greek and Roman times the view was taken that there were many gods, and the world was their plaything... We can't control the gods, they thought, and if the gods choose to play havoc with us and with the creation we can only look on in dismay and try to appease them, especially through sacrifices.

The second answer, from the Manichaeian religion during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, was to say that there are two equal but opposed forces at work, goodness and evil...which are in constant battle with each other.

Christianity, looking at the moral complexity of creation, adopted from Judaism the myth of Adam and Eve and said that the cruelty and evil in the world were the result of the Fall...that moment when humanity rejected the teachings of God. That primal disobedience then infected the whole of creation... 'sin' entered everything, including humanity.

Within Judaism another idea developed: whereas originally, Jewish people in the Old Testament regarded God as responsible for sending both good and evil, that idea gradually gave way to another, which said that the evil in humanity and in creation was brought about by God's adversary, the Satan, the Devil... the angel who fell from heaven...

The New Testament often refers to that idea...for example, Jesus spoke of seeing Satan falling from heaven...and Paul talked about putting on spiritual armour to fight against the Devil... and he also referred to the Creation itself groaning as it waited for the final revelation of God's glory...

So, 2000 years later, where do we stand?

There is no simple answer to the problem of evil...at least, not one that I have discovered. Some, like St Augustine, claim that evil is simply an absence of the good...but that idea seems pretty weak to me; it does not take account of the malevolence of evil.

Others say that this world is a battle ground between God and the Devil...but that leaves us with a problem. If God is all-powerful and all-good, how can God allow another spiritual entity to toy viciously and absurdly with us and the creation?

The only way that makes some sense to me of the problem of evil is to refer to free-will. Free-will is a part of our humanity...but it is allied to two other elements. We have the potential to exercise forgiveness and we have the potential to love...

But how can this do anything about the twist in creation? It does not stop the fox killing the chickens...

At which point I am almost at a loss...except...

What if by creating the universe God limited himself...and that self-limitation necessarily allowed room for things other than himself to be. It was a huge gamble because the matter that came into being developed a will of its own...

(I am thinking aloud with you here...)

However, I cannot speculate about the creation and humanity and ignore the person of Jesus Christ...

What I see in Him is one who pulls all the evil in creation towards himself and thereby begins to nullify it... He takes the twist in creation, and the twist in human beings, and with wounded hands begins to untwist it...

So, suppose the Fall is not something that infected humankind and creation millions of years ago but is a description of what happens at every moment of the world's existence...and then imagine that Christ's redeeming love for us and all creation also happens in the same way, that is, every second, every minute, every day, every month. Through the power and grace of God he strives to carry out his work of redemption continuously... and that will go on until the ages end...

Thanks be to God...

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert