

Where is God now?

Just a few weeks ago we heard of the passing of Elie Wiesel, Jewish writer, professor, human rights and peace activist, Nobel Peace Laureate, survivor of the Shoah (Holocaust). Eliezer Wiesel was born in the town of Sighet, now part of Romania. In 1944 at the age of fifteen he and his family were deported to the German concentration and extermination camps where his mother, father and little sister perished. Wiesel and his older sisters survived, living through the torment and despair of that experience. After the war Wiesel was one of the first Holocaust survivors to break the silence. He said his experience in the camps changed forever his understanding of God: "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed ... Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never" (*Night*). Wiesel struggled to make sense of what was happening in the camps but nothing from the past, nor his studies of Talmud (Jewish rabbinical writings), were of help. There was nothing that was an adequate response to and understanding of that horror. Wiesel did not lose faith in God utterly but, as he says, he learned to ask different questions: "I pray to the God within me that He will give me the strength to ask Him the right questions" (*Night*).

For many survivors the Shoah was a crucible in which their faith was tried in the extreme. In that unimaginable suffering many found it impossible to believe in a loving, benevolent God any longer. But for Wiesel the question of God in the world never left him. He raised this in many of his writings. In his novel *Gates of the Forest*, for example, the character Gregor confronts the rebbe (Hasidic spiritual leader): "'After what has happened to us, how can you believe in God?' And with an understanding smile, the rebbe answered, 'How can you not believe in God after what has happened?'" Answering a question with a question was characteristic of Wiesel's probing mind as he struggled with the question of God. He said that all his reading and writing, reflection and prayer, had not resolved the issue of the concept of God in the world. But Wiesel appeared content with this questioning, saying, "Life is defined by questions ... I like the word 'questions' because of the word 'quest' in it. We are here on a quest".

In his work, *Night*, Wiesel presents us with one of the most profound of all human questions. *Night* is one of the books in *The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, The Accident*, Wiesel's work based on his experiences in the Auschwitz, Buna and Birchenwald camps. In it he describes this scene: a young boy is hanging on the gallows alongside two men who have already died. But the young boy is struggling, clinging to life, dying slowly and painfully. Behind him Wiesel hears someone whisper: "For God's sake, where is God now?" And he says that from somewhere deep within him came the response: "Where is He? God is there, hanging on the gallows".

Where is God now? Although this is one of those timeless questions we humans ponder, there are certainly moments in history when this question is asked with increased urgency and poignancy. The world of today is surely one of those moments. As I write, the world is once again facing the horror of a cruel and shocking attack, this time in Nice. And there is

Turkey, South Sudan, more shootings in America, the endless stream of desperate people, displaced, homeless, seeking refuge. Earlier this week there were heart-breaking images on the evening news of little children working in potato fields, refugee children from Syria digging for hours in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. And tonight we hear of a twelve year old boy beheaded. Fear is everywhere.

Perhaps you ask that same question yourself - where is God now? I know I do. There are many ways of responding. Some people abandon the God-quest altogether and stop asking the question. God is unseeable and unknowable in such a world. God does not exist. Some turn inward and become self-protective, seeking to eradicate anything and anyone that is 'other'. The rhetoric is angry, violent and cruel. Some adopt a fundamentalist view, the 'God on *our* side' approach, claiming to speak for God. And as happens when we do that, that 'god' is the god of ourselves writ large. The god who justifies our own positions, choices and actions. None of these responses satisfy that deepest part of my self that seeks an authentic, deep-down awareness, experience and openness to life, a real understanding of what truly matters, of what makes me indeed human and able to live the fullness of my human potential.

The world we are in is the crucible of our faith. It is here, in the midst of all that is happening, that we will struggle and quest. It is here that faith will be forged or abandoned. And it is into this world, such as it is, that the ancient wisdom of our Tradition might speak to us again and again and point the way to where God might be. The ancient wisdom I am thinking of right now and which I do believe offers something real in response to that question - where is God now? - is expressed simply and powerfully in that well known biblical story of Noah and his ark. It has much to say to our present world. This is how the story goes: At a certain time in history the whole earth was flooded and one good man, Noah, had the foresight to avoid this total destruction and build a boat on which he placed, along with his own family, a male and female of every living species on earth so as to save them from extinction. We find this story in the Book of Genesis, that treasury of mythology, stories of wisdom and insight, stories of truths we hold to and engage with as we look upon the world and life. Mythology is the vehicle for conveying these truths. So this story, of course, is not meant to be read at face value, it is not an historical account of what happened. It is rather a story that is truer than true in that it happens again and again inside of our lives.

In the words of a wonderfully insightful contemporary spiritual writer, Ronald Rolheiser, the story might be recast this way: Every so often - and sometimes quite frequently - there comes a time when there is so little vision, faith, idealism, decency and charity left on this planet that there is a real danger that the world itself will sink, will drown, and revert to a chaos that will kill everything that's precious. But one person, despite all that is going on around him or her, will keep his or her eyes on what's higher, keep faith intact, protect life, and refuse to compromise charity and decency. And because of this one person's vision, idealism, faith, decency and charity, a pocket of life, that still contains all that is precious, will be preserved and given a new chance to grow. The wisdom of Noah and the ark is not only a story that is true on the large world stage. It is a story which is played out daily in our

own lives. Perhaps it would be better to say it is a story which *can be* played out daily in our own lives if we so choose. Noah's ark is a boat of faith, vision, idealism, decency and charity. These virtues give us the capacity to float above the chaos that drowns things. And they contain within themselves all that is precious and that needs to be protected and given a continued chance for life.

And surely, this is where God is to be found.

If we have, lurking in our hearts and minds, any remnant of the 'magician God' who can make things right in an instant and intervene to prevent bad things happening, then the world we are living in today, as did Wiesel's world, will surely challenge us to look more critically at this image of God and search more deeply.

In a talk titled "God and I", American Benedictine nun and spiritual writer, Joan Chittister, shares her own journey into a maturing sense of where and how God is in the world. And in so doing, she invites her listeners into a real God-quest:

"What I have learned about God after a lifetime of seeking, is that first God must be sought in the light. And that secondly, God does not have to be found. If found means packaged. Put in a catechetical test tube. Dogmatised. Sold. And sinned against. If there's anything in the world however that may deserve our pity, it may well be the very idea of God. What else in the history of humankind has been more reviled as fraud, more ridiculed as unprovable or on the other hand more glorified out of existence, more condemned to unattainable remoteness, than the notion of God? The wag wrote once, 'First God created us, and then we created God' ... The marketplace is in fact full of ideas about God, the religious marketplace. Religious tradition itself, not the least of the purveyors of those marketers and those ideas. Some of these ideas have been helpful to the development of a God-life within me, but some of them have not. One of the best things I was ever taught about God, I was taught by a philosophy professor who told us that we couldn't think God. And he was obviously right though clearly, think God we do, and plenty. In my own case God has been a changing, moving, inviting, disturbing and totally engrossing mystery. The more I thought about God it seemed, the less I knew God at all. I have feared the God of judgement and been judgemental of others. I have used God to get me through life, called the intolerable, God's will. Called our failure to stop our evil, God's failure to stop that evil. And expected God to be the crutch that would make the unbearable bearable. And as a result I failed often to take steps to change life either for myself or worse perhaps, for others ... But when such small ideas die, with what great thoughts shall we replace them? I have become sure that if all I know about God is that my God is the fullness of life and the consummation of hope, the light on the way and the light at the end, I will live my life in the consciousness of Godness, goodness everywhere. Obscure at times perhaps, yes, but never wholly lacking anywhere in anyone at any time".

If all I know about God is that my God is the fullness of life and the consummation of hope, the light on the way and the light at the end, I will live my life in the consciousness of Godness, goodness everywhere. Chittister invites us to see that God is not a concept, not another 'commodity' we can pluck off the shelf. God is manifestly real in the way we look at life, at others, in the ways we respond to what happens, the choices we make, the love we

are able to live out of. And as we begin to embrace the God who is embodied in all these ways we will find ourselves on a real God-quest.

The challenging and life-giving thing about such a God-quest, however, is that it will take us from certainty to faith. That can be a terrifying thought for some, for when we live in faith, or perhaps we should say when we live *out of* faith, we have no glib answers. What we do have, however, is invitation. We have an invitation to live in light, to day by day, look within ourselves and weed out anything that is not of the light, that does not celebrate and embody and ensure life for all. This is a slow, lifelong process, with many steps forward and backwards. It requires that we grapple with each situation and that even as we ask ourselves 'where is God now', we commit to responding in love, justice, peace, decency, hospitality. This is in fact the way marked out by Jesus, for as we look at his life and words we see him making that choice for life, even into his death. He chose to look with compassion upon the suffering of humanity - the physical and emotional or mental suffering, the suffering caused to the poor by the judgement and marginalisation inflicted on them by the 'haves', the suffering caused by imposing narrow religious ideas which left people outside of God's realm - and he responded to all this with an invitation to draw near and see the true face of God, a face of love.

Hatred, revenge, destructive acts, all that is life-denying, will by their very nature be strong, all too evident, overwhelming, just like the torrential rain threatening the very survival of life in our Genesis story. But let us remember: "The truth is that in the very thick of it all - in the songs that rise from dry, dusty refugee camps; in the hearts of those who have survived torture; in the forging of new friendships; in the small miracles of life that stare down death - there lives, in Gerard Manley Hopkins' lovely phrase, "the dearest, freshness, deep down things". There lives the God of our hearts, the One who breaks down the barriers of hostility that divide our troubled world. Despite the violence and poverty, the losses and the suffering and the insurmountable problems, God is present - the steady flame that can never be quenched. This same God, of course, also sets the heavens spinning. Dances inside van Gogh's brush. Delights in the music of Bach, the poetry of Rumi, and the laughter of children. Answers to names like Wonderful, Counsellor, Friend and Beloved, Desire of the Everlasting Hills, the One who is always there. Shelters with inexplicable tenderness all who draw near, and is endlessly inventive in wooing back those who stray. Once this God has our attention however, we no longer have excuses for lukewarmness or delay. This God desires our hearts, yes, with a fierce desire, but first wants them connected, with leading strings of love, to the whole human family, especially the poor and outcast" (From *This Flowing toward Me* by Marilyn Lacey RSM).

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