

FINDING GOD IN THE WORLD

Just imagine a friend, an incredibly close friend whom you had known all your life. You could almost say that you had been together since before you were born because your mothers were friends, they were pregnant at the same time and you had been born within a few months of each other.

You had grown up with this friend, played together as children and, as you got into your teens, you found that you had a lot in common. You were both perhaps a little more idealistic than the average teenager. You could see a lot of unhappiness and injustice in your society and you each felt a burning desire to do something about it. You spent a lot of time talking together, bouncing ideas off each other, letting off steam when some new outrage in the world came to your attention.

As you reached adulthood, your friend seemed a bit more focussed than you were, ready to start making a difference to the world. You held back as your friend set out on this mission but you watched with delight when you saw the difference this made, the real effect your friend was having on a lot of people's lives. *Yes! Wonderful!* You were so proud.

So you then took a bit of time out to reflect on where you wanted to be but during this time you had something of a personal crisis. It was as though nasty voices kept whispering in your ears, telling you that you were wasting your time; your ideals were out of date; there were far easier ways of living. This whole process left you confused and exhausted. You just sat in a heap, waiting for something to get you going again.

Then you hear the terrible news. Your friend, your dear friend who was doing such great work, has been arrested and put in prison. Not because of any great crime; simply for speaking the truth and it was a truth which one particularly nasty and powerful person did not want to hear. No proper trial, no legal defence system, just indefinite imprisonment and this for a thoroughly good person who only ever wanted to make a positive difference to unhappy people in an unhappy world.

So there you are. What do you do?

I think it is fair to say that you would feel incredibly angry. Furious. Outraged. How could this happen? How could this be allowed to happen?

And then your anger would take you in one of two basic directions. Either you would sink back into total despair: *it is no good. This is a horrible world with horrible people and I just want to climb into bed and keep my head under the covers.*

Or you would be fired into action. This is a horrible world with horrible people but I am hanged if I am going to give up. I am going to challenge this evil, this injustice, this unhappiness and even if I end up dead or in prison I will at least know that I have done my best. (And maybe encouraged a few more to do the same.)

Anger: does it push you into despair or fire you into action?

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This story was more or less that of Jesus and John the Baptist. Their mothers were friends and Jesus and John were born within a few months of each other and grew up together in an unhappy, unjust society. Both were aware early on that they had a mission to the world and John set out on his mission first. He went to preach to the people about the kingdom of God- a kingdom of love and mercy, justice and peace. He would remind them that they were children of God and that nothing- not even an oppressive Roman Government- could take that away from them. He would teach

them about fair behaviour even in an unfair world. He would urge them to hope for better things even in hard times. And he made a difference. People listened to him, they were inspired by him, he gave them back some hope and some self-esteem. Hundreds were baptised in the river, showing their commitment to a new life and a new relationship with God. It was amazing.

Jesus, in the meantime, had withdrawn into the desert to think and to pray about his own mission. And while he was there, we are told, he was “tempted by the devil.” Now we may not have been visited by a nasty-looking black creature with horns and a forked tail but we do know about destructive voices in our heads- the doubts and fears and regrets and confusions that go on and on inside us, tormenting us and beating us up and throwing us off course.

That was the kind of thing which was happening to Jesus during his time in the desert. He got through it. He sent the devil packing but he was left exhausted.

Then came the news- the terrible news that King Herod had thrown John into prison simply because John had pointed out that the law of the land- which the King should surely know- did forbid the having of an affair with your brother’s wife, persuading her to divorce him and then marry you, which was what Herod had done. This King was an incredibly weak, vicious and petty-minded man. When my brother played that role in a production of Jesus Christ Superstar he was wheeled onto the stage in a foaming bubble bath, beauticians in attendance, and his costume consisted of a pair of tight gold lame bathing trunks and a shower cap. You get the picture....

And this man, this pathetic travesty of a King, had the power to put someone like John into prison and keep him there.

What did Jesus do? We were told that when he heard that John had been put in prison he went up to the land of Galilee- in the north of the country, where life was hard- and he started his ministry, taking up where John had left off, healing, teaching, saving, calling people to follow him. And they did. They saw in him a reflection of God himself. This one was even greater than John. John had been God’s messenger. Jesus was God’s Son.

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Karl Marx said that “religion was the opium of the people.” It was a fantasy, dished out by the powerful, to keep the poor happy and to stop them from getting angry. The kind of religion Marx had seen was rather like that: Church and State working hand in hand to extract money from vulnerable people and to enforce their obedience. But you know, actually encountering God for yourself is often far more about being stirred up than about being sent back to sleep.

Think of William Wilberforce, who was hoping for a nice secure position in Parliament, being roused to indignation by the plight of negro slaves, then finding others equally concerned who told him that this was God speaking him, God calling him and, in the name of God they would back him in ridding the world of this horrible injustice.

Think of William Stead, a successful London journalist in the nineteenth century, enjoying his well-paid position on the Pall Mall Gazette but also using it to highlight some appalling social evils. He was presented by the Salvation Army with some horrifying facts about child prostitution in England which roused him to fury. “*This should raise hell,*” he shouted. “*It does not even raise the neighbours,*” he was told. “*Then I will raise hell,*” he said and, with the backing of Josephine Baker, an anglican

The church, that is the Christian community, was never intended to be a secure and cosy place. The church of Jesus Christ is not a happy little band of pilgrims who just keep singing their favourite hymns together and present a picture to the world of some kind of spiritual Stepford: people with bland and vacant smiles on their faces; never a doubt or a fear in their minds; never a challenge on their lips. That kind of church is no help to anybody.

As we have baptised little Amy today we have hoped and prayed that she will have a happy life, a life filled with love and joy, a life in which she will grow strong in body and mind. And we mean this and we, as her church family, will do anything we can to help her achieve this. We hope with all our hearts that she will find this church a loving, friendly, happy place to be.

But what I also hope is that Amy will find in the church a community who will listen to her when she asks questions, difficult questions about life and about God. A community who will assure her that she has the right to ask these questions and that she is not out of order or being a nuisance or a bad Christian because she has her doubts.

I hope she will find, when life makes her angry, very angry, that there will be people here who will say, "*yes, I'm angry too,*" and not tell her that God should be feeding her some kind of spiritual opium to dull the pain.

I hope she will find, in her anger, people here who can help her to discover her particular vocation, what she can do in life to make a difference. Not everyone is called to be a famous crusader but everyone finds some work for God and for the kingdom of God if they really want it and if they are fired up enough to go for it.

I hope she will find that faith is about finding God in the world- the real world, the bad world, the cruel world- finding God in her anger, her doubts, her frustrations. Finding God, shaking his hand and moving on together as partners.
Amen.