

Sermon Blean Free Will

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At midday yesterday the elbow of a large digger, which was on the back of a lorry, hit the side of a bridge on the M20 near Maidstone. The laws of physics meant that the sharp metal point of the digger's arm prevailed, whilst the bridge split in two and collapsed onto the carriageway below. It seems that there was some sloppiness in the way the digger had been loaded onto the truck. It became a news story of great local interest (and national interest too, for anyone wanting to use the M20 this weekend). So we followed it on Kentonline, to find out the details: travel chaos, but no serious casualties.

"Thank God that nobody has been seriously injured or killed" wrote a 'commenter' on the webpage. Another chipped in, "Or why not blame God for allowing it to happen in the first place?", adding, "Perhaps it has nothing whatsoever to do with God". So, some profound theological questions were being raised on a summer's afternoon in the most unlikely of forums.

The issue chimes in quite well with our first reading, from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiasticus. Calamities, and good- or ill-fortune, are determined by a sovereign God. Human pride, here, seems to take the form of a denial of the ongoing presence and activity of God.

This is fairly typical of the Old Testament, where, it stands to reason, an all-powerful creator-God is in charge of things. An Old Testament view of

yesterday's bridge disaster would be to say that it was a sort of shot across the bows, a way for God to show who's boss; and a reminder to people that they do not have as much control of their travel plans (or any plans) as they think they do.

In fact, that kind of view persisted well into the Christian era, and it comes over in some of the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer. Here, in the Prayers to be used at Sea, or in times of poor weather or famine, the clear suggestion is that God himself is the cause of the affliction, and that God himself can bring an end to it. A 'Prayer for Use at Sea' begins, "O Most powerful and glorious Lord God, at whose commands the winds blow, and life up the waves of the sea...Save Lord, or else we perish". It continues in very much in the vein of our Old Testament reading "We confess that...we have forgot thee our God;...but now we see how terrible thou art in in all thy works of wonder...help Lord, and save us...".

So that's a classic view of the 'big things', God's work in the natural world.

Another way of thinking about the work of an all-powerful God is in the life of the individual. In Christianity, God's grace has an important part to play in people's lives. In the Eastern Churches, doing good has always been seen as a *cooperative endeavour*. All human beings have an innate capacity to do good of their own accord, but they need some extra help and encouragement and that comes through God's Grace, which begins at Baptism. So in Christian Greece and Russia, people have always thrived on a *combination* of innate right-thinking; and the power and guidance of God's grace.

In the Western Church, where thinking has been affected by scholars like Augustine and Luther, it's been different. At times it has been taught that humans can do *no good* without God's grace, and it was up to God to rescue them and make them good. That's called Predestination, and the idea was that nobody can know and experience God's grace, or even do a single good act, unless He has chosen to make it available to a person. You still see that set out in Article 10 of the 39 Articles at the back of the old Prayer Book.

But it's very unusual nowadays for Christian people to attribute all that goes on in the world, including things like the Italian earthquake, to the immediate will of the divine mind and the work of the divine hand. And in spite of Article 10 in the Prayer Book, it's also unusual, but not unheard of, for Christian people nowadays to talk about Predestination in the traditional sense, the idea that God is some kind of puppet-master, and that a person can do no good unless God has chosen to start moving the strings.

Having said that, we're all aware that, almost without thinking about it, we think or talk about our sense that God is revealing some sort of plan in our own lives; or – like the 'commenter' on the Kentonline news site – that in some instances God acts to avert greater disaster: 'Thank God it wasn't worse'; or "thank God I left home ten minutes earlier" and so on. But at the same time we are sensible people, informed by science and rational thinking. We understand and accept the way things happen, even earthquakes, whilst holding to the idea of a good God, not a vindictive God, who's there somewhere in the background.

In the end, all will be well. And for now we focus on the love and compassion we see in the world, especially among those who humanely pick up the pieces. We also think about nature's beauty, even the enduring beauty of the Umbrian Hills. And about the simple teaching of Jesus, who in today's Gospel reading reminds us of the value of humility, and the importance of looking out for the poor and disadvantaged.

The issues of human free will, and the ways God works in the world, have always been debated in Christianity and this will continue to be the case. The important thing, nowadays, is that it's not seen as arrogance against God to think things through and work out a decent course of action.

But in a way the subject is more interesting than ever at the moment because the official position embraced by Sunni Islam, which is the main kind of Islam, is *much less flexible*. Since early medieval times Sunni Muslim scholars have fixedly taught that *anything* that happens in the world is the result of continuous, specific and immediate divine intervention. Nothing happens by accident, and science may provide an explanation of how things happen, but not why.

So with yesterday's incident on the M20, both the bridge collapse, and the lack of serious casualties, and the traffic jams, were all down to God's will. Hard to explain why, but it was. So was the Italian earthquake, and so was the 2005 Tsunami, which was commonly interpreted in the Muslim world as being a manifestation of divine judgment, however uncomfortable that seemed.

And get this. Between 1983 and 1984, in Pakistan, the religious authorities managed to have weather-forecasts banned. If an incalculable God directly creates the weather (as they believed) then the weather cannot be calculable. To attempt to predict it is an affront to God: in other words, blasphemy.

There are more issues with the Sunni Muslim view of the human person: if God directly determines everything, he also directly determines every act of every man, woman and child. And to say that God does not do that is like saying that God is not an all-powerful sovereign, which is a blasphemy again. This view, which is sometimes called 'Occasionalism', because God is acting on every occasion when something happens, is rather akin to the Augustinian and Medieval Christian ideas of the predestination human beings.

But why go on about this? The first reason is that there has been a serious earthquake this week, and once again we are asking "Where is God in all of this?". The second reason is because these days we ask the question against the backdrop of similar questions in Islam, and we want to be reassured about the superiority of the Christian answers.

Although a lot of Sunni Muslims may not be aware of it, they will eventually have to come to terms with the fact that their scholars have rejected the insights of reason and science, and still embrace a form of fundamentalism which has roots dating from the 10th century AD. Every day Muslims use the phrase '*Inshallah*', which means 'God Willing'. 'Let's meet tomorrow for coffee, God Willing'. This reflects the deep seated idea that at every level their human will is subordinate to God's, and some Muslim scholars argue

that it is obligatory for a Muslim to use this expression every time he or she proposes to do something in the future, in deference to the fact that only God has any real control of their lives.

Our modern Christian understanding comes from a sensible balance between trying to get an understanding of what God is like, not least in using the scriptures; and a sensible grasp (and certainly not a rejection) of what reason and science have to offer. St Paul wrote “Ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen in the mind’s understanding of created things”.

Later on Thomas Aquinas, who laid the theological foundations for modern western Christianity, argued that reason and revelation *are* compatible. Christ is the *logos*, a human embodiment of Divine reason. The last Pope wrote, “From the beginning, Christianity has understood itself as the religion of the ‘*Logos*’, as the religion according to reason;...the philosophical enlightenment has cleared the path of tradition to turn to the search of the truth and toward the good, toward the one God who is above all gods”.

Does all this help us with our reflections on the comments posted after the report of the M20 incident. I will repeat them:

“Thank God that nobody has been seriously injured or killed”; Then someone chipped in: “Or why not blame God for allowing it to happen in the first place?”, adding, “Perhaps it has nothing whatsoever to do with God”.