

GOD AT WORK

By JUSTIN J. KELLY

GOD AT WORK: the title suggests a sign next to an open manhole, or along a roadside: 'Men Working'. The busy men thus proclaimed are almost always out of sight; otherwise, why the sign? A sceptic will question whether they are there at all; or, if they are, how much work is really going on. Maybe the yawning hole, and the empty highway stretching towards the horizon, are symbols as eloquent as our mechanical society can provide of God at work. If they lack something of the majesty of the biblical image of God 'stretching out the heavens like a tent-cloth' and 'walking on the wings of the wind', they are at any rate closer to our deprived experience. We seem to find God chiefly in his absence, tracing his activity in signals which point to it, in imprints that it leaves. Do the gaps and blank vistas in our experience simply direct us to the place where he could be found, if we took the time to look? And would we find there, as St Ignatius did, a God who 'works and labours for us in all the creatures upon the face of the earth'?¹

Perhaps. In one way, nothing is more basic to the faith of the Christian than the conviction that God is truly at work in his life; that the joys and disappointments, trials and successes of existence all come from him, and express his loving purpose. 'For those who love him, God makes all things work together unto good, to all who are called according to his purpose', writes Paul in a famous passage.² According to Bultmann, true faith, as opposed to mere religious speculation, 'can only be the recognition of the activity of God in one's own life'.³ At the same time, nothing is more of a scandal and a challenge to faith than precisely this conviction. To the unbeliever, the idea of a God 'watching over us with loving care' seems flagrantly in conflict with the facts of daily experience. When children are burned to death in a fire caused by a christmas tree, when the egomaniacal dictator of a small country tyrannizes its citizens and slaughters or expels foreigners, when an eleven-

¹ *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, 'Contemplation to attain the Love of God', third point.

² Rom 8, 28.

³ Bultmann, R.: *Jesus and the Word* (London, 1958), p 113.

year-old girl is lured into prostitution and then falls or is thrown to her death from a hotel window: even the believer may wonder what it means to sing 'He's got the whole world in his hands'. The Christian may feel more like repeating the words of the psalmist: 'Does God know? Is there any knowledge in the Most High?'⁴

Precisely because he believes, the person of faith may find himself more troubled by the glaring inequalities and injustices of life than the one who does not. He expects more of his God than the tragedies and disasters with which the news media are replete. Even the happy exclamations of the fortunate survivors pose problems for his faith. 'Somebody up there must like me' strikes him as shallow and ultimately irreligious. It cheapens the idea of God to think of him in these terms. Why should God snatch me out of the path of the tornado, the runaway car, the madman's bullets, when he didn't bother to do the same for somebody else? The believer's notion of God is too exalted for him to be comfortable with the idea that God plays favourites. So arbitrary a deity inspires little trust; he seems too obviously merely luck with a capital L.

'One of the thieves was saved', muses the tramp Vladimir, adding after a pause: 'It's a reasonable percentage'.⁵ The blatant unreasonableness of reckoning percentages in matters of salvation is evident. Its absurdity poses in semi-comic terms the ancient, troubling question: free will notwithstanding, is not God ultimately responsible for the bad thief too? For Cain as well as for Abel? Mircea Eliade reports that the Tunguses, an asian tribe, believe in a sky god who 'sometimes brings them good luck and sometimes ill, but say they do not understand by what criterion he decides which to do'.⁶ The christian believer may not feel notably wiser in this matter.

Granted, then, many aspects of experience are not easy to reconcile with the biblical God: the One whom Jesus calls 'Father', whose knowledge and love are alike unlimited, and who accomplishes all that he wills. Yet the alternatives which have been offered, from the remote 'clockmaker God' of deism to the well-meaning but helpless God of some forms of process-thought, do little to dispel the mystery. An unconscious or impersonal God, like the Immanent Will of Hardy's poetry, is a myth as useless as it is contradictory. Ultimately the God of the christian tradition,

⁴ Ps 73, 11.

⁵ Beckett, S.: *Waiting for Godot* (New York, 1954), p 8.

⁶ Eliade, M.: *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958), p 63.

who in the words of Julian of Norwich 'cometh down to us, to the lowest part of our need',⁷ is the only God worthy of belief. Where may he and his working be found?

The experience of providence

Undoubtedly the best place to begin the search is where the idea of providence itself begins: in the individual believer's experience. For the core of the notion of God at work, or of someone 'watching over us with loving care', is first of all given in experience, rather than in some philosopher's or theologian's mental system. What is that experience like?

Most often, it begins with the discovery of an unexpected harmony, leading to the awareness that a power wiser and stronger than my own has been at work; something is brought about which has a beauty, a rightness, beyond anything my limited human intelligence could have anticipated. One perceives an order so far-reaching, yet so unforeseen, as to give rise to the awed consciousness of an Other – an Other present and active in ways one did not expect. 'God was in this place, and I knew it not':⁸ the words of Jacob waking from his dream at Beth-el suggest the numinous wonder flowing from this experience. Similarly, when Paul reviews the strange course of his life, he is overwhelmed with the sense of a power at work other and greater than his own:

I am the least of all the apostles; in fact, since I persecuted the Church of God, I hardly deserve to be called an apostle. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and that grace given me has not been without effect. On the contrary, I have worked harder than any of the others; or rather, not I, but the grace of God in me.⁹

It would be a mistake to read this 'not I, but the grace of God' as a statement of self-conscious humility ('I've done pretty well, but I'd better not say so myself'); it is a genuine cry of amazement at the way God achieves his aims through so fickle and fallible an instrument. In this experience, as Rudolf Otto notes, even a person's free choices and decisions become, without losing their freedom, something a person is given and receives rather than does. 'Before every deed of his own', says Otto, the believer 'sees love the deliverer in action, seeking and selecting, and acknowledges that an eternal

⁷ *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich*, James Walsh, ed. (St. Meinrad, Indiana: 1974), p 56.

⁸ Gen 28, 16.

⁹ 1 Cor 15, 9-10.

gracious purpose is watching over his life'.¹⁰ This sometimes entails the sensation that 'one walks continually through open doors' (to quote an author cited by William James); in a slightly more modern metaphor, that traffic lights all turn green as you approach them. 'Everything occurs to us at the right moment, just as if a third person were keeping watch over things which we are in danger of forgetting'.¹¹

The gospels suggest that Jesus himself was capable of being 'surprised by the Spirit', and felt awe at the discovery of his Father at work. In Luke's account, when the returning disciples report to Jesus the marvels they have worked in his name ('even the demons submit to us'), he is 'filled with joy by the Holy Spirit' and praises the Father for acting in a way that contradicts normal human expectations: 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and clever, and for revealing them to mere children. Be it so, Father, since this is what it has pleased you to do'.¹² Jesus's words contain the characteristic note of awe in response to mystery. The revelation given to children does not remove the mystery but on the contrary intensifies it. What happens is that one is given the grace to *love* the mystery. The humanly unforeseen and improbable is recognized as somehow better than the results of human calculation. One cannot explain fully why or how, but everything fits, 'it makes a crazy kind of sense'.

Believers of all eras, from biblical times to the present, give similar testimony. God is discovered 'providing' in the unforeseen design, the coming together of disparate parts which mysteriously 'fit'. Peter and John are told that, as they enter Jerusalem, they will meet a man carrying a water-pitcher; they are to ask him for a room in which Jesus and they can eat the passover supper, and he will show them a large upper room, furnished. 'They set off and found everything as he had told them'.¹³ Augustine, at the precise moment when his prolonged and often anguished search for God is climaxed by an intense inner struggle, suddenly hears a child's voice chanting 'Take and read, take and read'. He opens the scriptures and his eye falls on a passage that seems specifically addressed to himself; he realizes with a flood of joyous tears that

¹⁰ Otto, R.: *The Idea of the Holy* (2nd ed. Oxford, 1958), p 87.

¹¹ Hilty, C., in William James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1961), pp 367-68.

¹² Lk 10, 17-22.

¹³ Lk 22, 10-13.

his search is at an end.¹⁴ In a multitude of less dramatic but still significant ways, people find their lives altered by some unforeseeable accident, and recognize in it the gracious design of God: 'I missed the train, the plane, the boat; all my plans went up in smoke; and because of it, I had the experience, met the one person, who has made all the difference in my life'.

Beyond question, such recognitions depend to some extent on faith: that is, on a willingness to see a personal bearing in events which to another person may appear coincidental. The presence of God in them cannot strictly be verified (or falsified either) from a wholly objective, 'neutral' standpoint. Obviously, such beliefs and interpretations are always vulnerable to the charge of being sentimental, wish-fulfilment, projection, etc. This is only another way of saying that faith, as at least a disposition to believe, is a condition of discovering 'God at work'. At the same time, it is clear that the inability or unwillingness to view the events of life (or some of them) in such personal terms generally reduces belief in God to a lifeless deism. A living God is necessarily a 'God at work'.

Such a belief, moreover, changes the appearance that life has as a whole. What has been disclosed in a specific way to an individual is recognized as applying mysteriously to everyone and everything. One glimpses, says Otto, 'an Eternal, in and beyond the temporal and penetrating it . . . an ultimate, mysterious cosmic purposiveness'.¹⁵ The vast and complex processes of organic evolution and human development are recognized as belonging to the same movement as one's personal growth, and as having the same ultimate goal. In a marvellous way, everything fits. In this experience, as James puts it, 'the outward face of nature need not alter, but the expressions of meaning in it alter. . . . It is like the difference between looking upon a person without love, and looking upon the same person with love'.¹⁶ Nothing specific is changed, and yet everything is different.

Two analogies: art and love

Analogies to this kind of awareness can be drawn from certain 'secular' experiences, those of art and of romantic love in particular. In these also, the apparently fortuitous often becomes part of an emerging pattern: a pattern not fully planned or known in ad-

¹⁴ St Augustine: *Confessions*, Book VIII, section 12.

¹⁵ Otto, *op. cit.*, p 147.

¹⁶ James, *op. cit.*, p 368.

vance, but disclosing itself in the vital process. Creative artists have often described the way a meaning will emerge unexpectedly from the elements of a work: a significant pattern holding opposites in unity, so that 'things unbalanced in themselves balance each other'. The writer, composer, or painter has the sense of a meaning *found* rather than of one made or imposed. It seems to develop according to a pre-ordained plan, to have a life of its own; the final product is richer and fuller than the artist's conscious intentions, and sometimes runs quite counter to his original plans.

Thus Hamlet's discovery, that 'there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will', is a major theme, not only of Shakespeare's drama, but of the creative process itself. A classic, if extreme, instance of accident-becoming-art is found in Ellmann's biography of James Joyce. The great Irish novelist, gradually growing blind during his seventeen year travail with *Finnegan's Wake*, was dictating a section of it to his friend and temporary amanuensis, Samuel Beckett. There was a knock at the door, and Joyce's 'come in' was accidentally incorporated into the text. When the visitor left, the passage was read back to Joyce, including the 'come in'. He said: 'let it stand'.¹⁷

Similarly, the experience of love frequently involves a wonderful mixture of chance and choice, the arbitrary and the eternal. Events leading to love are notoriously whimsical and unpredictable: an accidental meeting, an unexpected remark, the sudden discovery of common interests, tastes or friends. Yet few people who have experienced real love can be persuaded that it was either purely accidental or wholly of their own choosing. Choice and accident both enter in, but as part of something greater which is felt to comprehend them. The love itself was 'meant to be', it has a meaning of its own not reducible to the things which produced it. Is this sense an illusion? If so, it is one of uniquely compelling power: the lover can no longer imagine himself or herself without precisely *this* other person in his or her life. The wonder of a love relationship springs in part from the dual awareness that 'it had to be, and yet it could have been otherwise'; the same duality characterizes the experience of Providence.

In the latter case, not only accident, but even human failure and sin, can become part of the design. Thus Paul meditates on the fate of his own people, whose rejection of Jesus has led to the gentiles

¹⁷ Ellmann, Richard: *James Joyce* (New York, 1959), p 662.

becoming part of the people of God. God, he concludes, 'has imprisoned all men in their disobedience, so that he may show mercy to all': even, in the end, the Jews themselves. His sudden glimpse of a vast design which encompasses all peoples and all ages, and works by contraries, with disobedience leading to mercy, fills him with awe:

How rich are the depths of God: how deep his wisdom and knowledge: and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods All that exists comes from him; all is by him and for him! To him be glory forever! Amen.¹⁸

Surrender to mystery

Thus Paul recognizes a supremely vast, harmonious, and beautiful design, and without being able to comprehend it, loves it: such is the experience of Providence. This kind of self-surrender in faith to the insuperably mysterious may seem quite opposed to the mind's natural desire for clear, intelligible knowledge. In fact, it is part of a dialectic, which completes it. Rational knowledge, it is said, begins in wonder. It fulfils itself the same way: that is, it ends in adoration. The faith which transcends rational knowledge satisfies a deeper human need than that of the intellect alone. According to psychologist Viktor Frankl, the need for meaning in life is the most comprehensive human need. 'Meaning', in this context, implies much more than facts and reasons. It involves the sense of worthwhileness, the deep, visceral conviction that things are 'o.k.', that life 'makes sense' not just rationally but personally, holistically. Furthermore, to achieve this 'sense of meaning' sometimes requires letting go of the demand for clear, rational answers. For instance, someone who has lost a significant person in his/her life (parent, spouse, child, or friend), or has failed or been frustrated in an important aim, often suffers an acute loss of meaning and purpose in life. There seems to be no value in going on. In such cases, it may happen that only in giving up (after a long struggle) the effort to comprehend with the mind, does the person rediscover life's worthwhileness. He is not required, says Frankl, to accept the meaninglessness of life, (*à la* Sartrean existentialism), but rather his own inability to grasp its absolute meaningfulness in rational terms: '*Logos* is deeper than logic'.¹⁹

¹⁸ Rom 11, 33-36.

¹⁹ Frankl, V.: *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York, 1963), p 188.

That the process Frankl describes has a real affinity with the discovery of 'God at work' is illustrated by the following excerpt. It is an account written by a young Franciscan about his struggle to come to terms with some extremely painful and faith-challenging experiences (chiefly the departure from religious life and the priesthood of his novice director and several other priests with whom he lived). The tensions and questions which these events provoked in relation to his own sense of his calling can easily be appreciated.

I walked among the apple trees, trying to 'pray', to understand, somehow to gain strength and to be strong, to know what I was supposed to do; why so many things seemed to be going wrong and where this whole mess was heading. I was alone and tired and weak. I was aware of a strong sense of poverty, of my own weakness and littleness. Here I was, a young kid from Wisconsin, walking in a field in Indiana, trying to understand the whole Capuchin Order, the world, life, truth, death, reality It was all too much.

The moon and stars shone brightly. It was a deep and still night. I could understand how earlier peoples had conceived the moon as a god. I stood now in an open field, alone, surrounded by the universe. Finally I stopped walking and sat down. I had tried hard enough. I knew that I could not do it. I could not win. I explained to God that he/she was the winner. The fight was ended. My life was once again in another's hands. I gave up.

In collapsing I was able to relax. I felt I had been gentled. I became weaker, not stronger. Yet I was delighted. Here I was, having nothing, feeling empty and poor, and yet I was delighted. I felt almost giggly. Certainly I was quietly happy.

In these moments I hadn't answered any of my questions. I hadn't healed the world. I hadn't done anything. Yet once again I had been reminded; I had been brought out and taught. I remembered, or was made to remember, a promise made long ago: 'I will be your God, and you will be my people'. I somehow had learned once again a little bit more of the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. 'Into your hands I commend my spirit'. Once again I was reminded that I too am the beloved son, the chosen one on whom God's favour rests.

The moon shone very brightly. I would return to my brothers, to the world, to all the confusion and complexities of our lives. But I would see it differently. I felt that while I had received nothing that I had asked God for, what I had been given was enough.

It is enough!²⁰

²⁰ By Joel Frank, O.F.M.Cap.

Though this account makes no explicit mention of Providence, it contains its most important element: meeting in faith a God who knows and cares, a God who can be trusted. No specific pattern is discerned (except the mysterious requirement of dying in order to find life); instead, a certainty is granted that it is all right to trust him. Again, 'it makes a crazy kind of sense'.

An experience of God

Thus the experience of Providence is essentially an experience of God, God in his very God-ness, his mystery. It is not the discovery of some plan distinct from (and hence less than) God himself. 'The plan of God', a phrase once beloved of priests and preachers, strikes a false note among religiously sensitive people. Its all-too-human image of a divine planner who has reasons for everything, overlooks transcendence; it minimizes the mystery which characterizes both God and the deeper aspects of life. To discover 'God at work', on the other hand, is to enter into mystery. Some aspects of that mystery can nevertheless be spelled out. The providential God is:

1. A God who cares. The experience of Providence reveals, at the heart of being, a personal source. In the midst of a seemingly indifferent universe, I discover one who is aware of my needs, one to whom I matter. 'Are you not of much more worth to him than the grasses and the birds, o you of little faith?'²¹ While this of itself does not take away the suffering and the frustration of life, it robs it of its sting. Whatever happens, I know 'I am not alone, for the Father is with me'.²² Julian, in her *Revelations*, has a vision of being let down onto the ocean-bed. There, among moss-covered hills, surrounded by wreckage and gravel, she is given to understand 'that if a man or woman were under the broad water, if he might see God in the way God is always with him, he should be safe in body and soul, and take no harm'. He wants us to believe, she says, that we see him continually, though to us it seems rare and occasional. 'For he will be seen, and he will be sought; he will be abided, and he will be trusted'.²³

2. A God who acts. The God of Jesus is as far removed from the spectator God of deism as it is possible to be. For Jesus, even the natural processes of growth and organic life are personal acts of the Father.²⁴ The image of God clothing the lilies and feeding the birds

²¹ Mt 6, 26.

²² Jn 16, 32.

²³ *Revelations, op. cit.*, p 63.

²⁴ Mt 6, 26; 6, 30.

is no mere 'poetic' metaphor, nor the expression of a naive, pre-scientific world-view. Rather, it expresses an insight springing from the very heart of religion. In Julian's words, God 'does all that is done'.²⁵ Nothing happens with which he does not actively co-operate, bring about, or permit. God is not only all-powerful, but literally all-doing: he is subsistent verb, 'pure act', the ultimate agent in all activity. 'For he is in the mid-point of all things, and he doeth all; but I was sure that he doeth no sin. Hence I saw truly that sin is no-deed. . . .'²⁶

3. A God who saves. God *redeems*. His doing is saving, his work redemptive. This is not some accidental activity of his, but belongs to his personal essence: it is, so to speak, what makes him God. By definition, he is one who 'makes well all that is not well'.²⁷ It is because of this that the healing ministry of Jesus is so integral to the message that he preaches: 'the kingdom of God is among you'. The spontaneous response of Jesus to the leper's hesitant request for healing suggests how closely he regarded it as part of his mission.²⁸ One is tempted to apply here the words John puts on the lips of Jesus, that the Son 'can do only what he sees the Father doing, and whatever the Father does, the Son does too'.²⁹ To heal and make whole, whether spiritually or physically, is *what God does*, it manifests his true essence. 'My Father goes on working, and so do I'.³⁰ This is probably what Van Der Leeuw had in mind when he claimed that, in the history of religions, 'if appearances are not entirely deceptive, God the Son subsisted before God the Father'. That is, God is first of all experienced as *saving Power*, not as the remote originator in 'the sacred world of the background', who 'hastens not' because he has become weary after creating.³¹

God's ultimate work

This redemptive working, which accomplishes ultimate good by the most unlikely means, including human injustice and sin, is supremely embodied in the crucifixion itself. There, in the words of D. M. Baillie, 'the worst thing that had ever happened through the sin of men' became 'the best thing that had ever happened in the Providence of God'.³² The fact that what came about through

²⁵ *Revelations, op. cit.*, p 66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 99.

²⁸ Mk 1, 40-42.

²⁹ Jn 5, 19.

³⁰ Jn 5, 17.

³¹ Van Der Leeuw, G.: *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Vol 1 (New York, 1963), pp 104, 167.

³² Baillie, D.M.: *God Was In Christ* (New York, 1948), p 112.

hatred and misunderstanding was nevertheless 'all right', as God wanted it to be – indeed, the climactic expression of his love – invites the believer to put the same trust in God as regards everything else. 'Seeing I have made well the greatest harm, shall I not make well all that is less?', God asks Julian.³³ Julian finds this a challenge to understand, let alone accept:

It seemed to me impossible that all manner of things should be well. But I had no other answer to the difficulty in this shewing of our Lord's except this: 'What is impossible to thee is not impossible to me; I shall save my word in all things – I shall make all things well'.³⁴

This belief, whatever its visionary origin, unquestionably echoes the teachings of the New Testament. At the climax of the Book of the Apocalypse is a vision of absolute renewal, in the image of the city from which tears and distress have vanished. 'And the voice from the throne said: behold, I am making everything new'.³⁵ In recognizing a God who has acted and continues to work in their lives, Christians put their faith in his greatest act, which is both coming and still to come: the final transformation of the universe, the reconciliation of all things in Christ. That God has the power to do this and will do it is what we mean when we say: 'the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever'.

³³ *Revelations, op. cit.*, p 94.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p 99.

³⁵ Apoc 21, 1–5.