GOD: JUDGE OR LOVER?

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THERE IS NO MORE CHALLENGING theme in contemporary faith's struggle for understanding than that of God's unconditional love for us and its relation to issues of divine justice, anger and punishment. Here we will focus on some of the issues connected with anger, God's anger and also ours.

Talk of divine anger often leads into complexity and confusion. Formulating a dilemma at its starkest helps focus the issue. If God is all-powerful, retaining absolute sovereignty over human freedom, then God has no cause for anger or grief, while humans seemingly have plenty of cause for anger against God. But if God is powerless, having granted human freedom, then God has plenty of cause for anger and grief, while humans have little or no cause for anger against God. The missing middle ground is where God has absolute sovereignty over human freedom and humans enjoy absolute freedom: a situation which certainly is recognized as deepest mystery and which needs to be recognized as most confusing in formulating any models for language about God—language must constantly take one or other stance.

Except perhaps in spirituality circles, talk of God's unconditional love can evoke negative reactions, ranging fom a bored or irritable shrug to upset contestation. As a theological option, it is too soft! We have all heard comments like 'Have we wasted our time being good all these years?' or worse, 'Does that mean Hitler and Stalin are in heaven?' Beneath the superficiality of this initial response can lie something deeper, with grave issues at stake. If God's love is unconditional, is human life belittled and deprived of worth? Are we then no longer held responsible for our actions, our lives reduced to some sort of monstrous charade? Is the language of God's love deprived of serious meaning without a dose of the wrath of God?

There are enough issues involved to form a veritable jigsaw puzzle. We need to consider some of the elements which go to make up the puzzle, to look closely at some of the pieces, and finally to scrutinize the overall picture.

Some elements of the puzzle

Anger in God. Given what we know of our world, if we believe that God loves humanity as a whole and every human individual, it is hardly possible not to think of God as immensely angry and deeply grieved. As modern communications have given visual immediacy to so much of our world, our generation more than any other is confronted with the terrible reality of suffering. There is suffering which comes from the abuse of freedom, the savagery of human selfishness and greed. In such a context, how can God not be spoken of as furiously angered by suffering so brutally and callously inflicted on innocent victims—whom God holds precious, honoured, and loved (Isai 43,4)? There is suffering which comes from the realm of nature: famine, disease, disaster. Faced with these, great or small, how can we speak of a loving God as other than grieving with us in our sorrow and our hurt?

Anger at God. Christian proclamation has always placed emphasis on the power of God, witness such a liturgical address as, 'Almighty and everlasting God'. Confronted with human suffering and misery in its manifold forms, the conviction that God has the power to right all this leads naturally to anger at the God who has not righted it. Occasionally, it is a diffuse anger at God for having created our world the way it is. More often, it is sharply and individually focused: why did God do this to me, why did God let this happen to me, where was God when I needed help?

Unconditional love and anger. Can we speak of God's anger while affirming God's unconditional love? Does language of God's anger suggest that the relationship of love has been broken? Does the language of God's unconditional love project an image of an all-permissive, all-condoning God—verging on the eminently wishy-washy?

Some of the pieces

The uses Israel makes of God's anger are quite remarkable. They extend far beyond the simple expression of anger. They repay close attention, although only a few can be touched on here.

God's anger and the world: the flood. Early in Israel's portrayal of the story of humankind, wickedness has become sufficiently widespread to drive God into destroying the human race in the flood. It is surely the most universally destructive display of the 'wrath of God'. Yet, surprisingly, there is no explicit mention of anger. Rather, the Yahwist speaks of God's sorrow and grief: 'The

LORD was sorry that he made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart' (Gen 6,5-7). The Priestly Writer has no reference to any emotion: 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them' (Gen 6,13). So only grief and sorrow are explicit in what has all the potential for a very angry scene.

It is the outcome of the flood which is extraordinary. Both Yahwist (8,21-22) and Priestly Writer (9,1-17) conclude their accounts with God's commitment never again to act towards the human race in this destructive way. Even more remarkable is the fact that this commitment is given alongside acceptance of the flaws, frailty, and wickedness of a less-than-perfect world. In the Yahwist, it is bluntly explicit. Humankind is blotted out because 'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually' (6,5); it will never happen again, because God accepts that 'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth' (8,21). Human evil will no longer be the trigger for the divine destruction of humankind. Similarly, in the Priestly Writer after the flood, 'the fear of you and the dread of you' is on all the animal world, and murder is to be reckoned with in the human world (9,1-7)—it is clearly a second-best world. Yet it has God's guarantee that it will never again be destroyed by a flood (9,11).

The destructive action of God in the flood is narrated in order to express God's unconditional commitment to the existence of flawed and frail humankind.

God's anger and Israel: the desert generation. A similar phenomenon, where the anger of God is used to emphasize God's commitment, may be seen with regard to Israel itself. It is most remarkable that the Israelite narrator-theologians should twice have God threaten to annihilate Israel and start salvation history afresh with a new nation, descended this time from Moses. It happens once in the middle of the sojourn at Mount Sinai (Exod 32); it happens again in the middle of the journeying through the desert (Num 14).

The storytellers do not mince words. At Sinai, they have God say to Moses about Israel: 'Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation' (Exod 32,10); and in the desert: 'How long will this people despise me? . . . I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they' (Num 14,11-12). In this second case, Israel's alleged contempt for God is taken out of the category

of occasional lapse and symbolized as a matter of permanent disposition: '(They) have put me to the proof *these ten times* and have not hearkened to my voice' (Num 14,22).

Each time Moses' intercession prevails (Exod 32,11-14; Num 14,13-25). Surely Israel has not retold these episodes as evidence of their own iniquity or of God's propensity to anger. Rather, these two critical episodes—one just after Sinai, the other just before the entry into the Promised Land—are used as witness to God's unshakable commitment to Israel, God's people.

God's anger and the prophets. The anger of God is not necessarily the first idea that comes to our minds in association with Israel's prophets. The school of thought which saw the prophets as God's messengers calling to repentance and reform, nobly spelling out the ideals of religious living, prevails in most people's minds over the image of the prophet as one who proclaimed the coming downfall of the nation, under the impact of divine anger. Yet this latter picture is closer to the reality of the pre-exilic prophets. Second Isaiah refers back to this anger before promising salvation for the future.

> For a brief moment I forsook you,
> but with great compassion I will gather you.
> In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,
> but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you
> (Isai 54,7-8).

The immense significance of this is that 'overflowing wrath' does not put an end to God's relationship with Israel. We speak often of the broken covenant; all too often we do not realize that the relationship to God remains unbroken, even unbreakable. We have only to listen to the one occasion on which a prophet clearly proclaims the relationship broken to realize just how rare it is. The prophet is Hosea and the proclamation is contained in the name of his third child, a name attributed directly to God.

> And the LORD said, 'Call his name Not-my-people,
> for you are not my people and I am not your God' (Hos 1,9).

It is also vital to remember that this judgement is reversed in the very next verse: 'and in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people", it shall be said to them, "Children of the

living God'' ' (Hos 1,10). In Amos's fifth and final vision, Israel is totally wiped out (Amos 9,1-4), but the visionary language does not have quite the disastrous impact of the direct speech of Hosea. In Isaiah and Ezekiel, while the imagery of devastation is almost total, some remnant is left to survive (cf Isai 6,9-13; Ezek 5,1-12). While there is anger and fury and fearful imagery, there is no declaration of irreparable rupture between God and Israel.

The scandal of God's anger in the Old Testament. The savagery of the expression given to God's anger in contexts like these can be felt as deeply scandalous. Yet we have to recall that it is language addressed to a people seen to be on the brink of disaster. The vividness and brutally shocking nature of the images and words can be understood as an attempt to break through the hardened shell of cynicism and apathy with which the people protected themselves from their prophets. We tend to think of religious apathy and scepticism as modern phenomena. The prophetic books make it abundantly clear that Israel's prophets were greeted in the same way by many.

For ourselves today, struggling with the fiery language of the prophets, there is need to recognize the inevitable tension between God's committed love and our human responsibility. We have been graced with God's love; we have been gifted with human freedom. Our acts have their consequences and God's love does not take those consequences away. The forces pilloried by Israel's pre-exilic prophets—lack of justice and loss of faith—were forces which destructively eroded Israel's national life from within. With people seized as slaves over debt, or driven off their ancestral lands by vicious laws, injustice in society would have fast destroyed any sense of national cohesion, any social bonding that could give a conscript peasant army morale and the will to fight. Conscripts in any age do not fight to defend the lands which have been taken from them by an aristocratic élite. Similarly, religious infidelity would have eroded the beliefs which might have encouraged an army in the conviction that God was fighting for them. An Assyrian commander is portrayed undermining such faith with cruelly ironic propaganda: 'But if you say to me, ''We rely on the LORD our God'', is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed?' (2 Kg 18,22; for social justice in the same speech, see vv 31-32).

Israel was culpably involved in practices and processes which made the survival of its national independence in the tough political

climate of the time so unlikely that its downfall was all but certain. Only a miracle, a massive change of attitude, might have prevented the collapse. The prophets pointed to the evils. They often spoke of God as the eventual destroyer. They were unable to pull off the miracle of national conversion. We cannot interrogate them on the specifics of their own theological understanding. We can only read between the lines of their texts—and the signals remain ambiguous. But we can say that often what they describe as God's wrath and anger is to be seen also as the evil effects and disastrous consequences of the misuse of human freedom and responsibility.[1]

The areas we have considered point to Israel's use of God's anger in remarkably subtle ways. With the flood, such anger allows expression to be given to God's unconditional commitment to humankind and the created world. With the desert generation, such anger allows the communication of God's unshakable commitment to Israel. Both of these touch the issue of how anger relates to unconditional love. The language of the prophets, in particular, may have the effect for us of legitimating the use of highly human and analogical language in speaking of emotions and feelings in God. While it is not a matter of looking to Old or New Testament for clear teaching on issues of God's anger and grief, yet there is value in recognizing the considerable complexity of the use of God's anger in biblical expression. What is the most appropriate way for us to speak of God today?

God's anger and traditional theology. The issue of God's power is central to any talk of anger in relation to God, and God's power is inextricably bound to the question of human freedom. Karl Rahner expresses the traditional position with succinct clarity.

> The teaching of human freedom . . . and the teaching of an absolute sovereignty of God's freedom over human freedom cannot be resolved for us here and now into a higher synthesis. All the attempts to do this in Christian theology (in Augustine, Thomas, Calvin, Bañez, Molina) have been doomed to failure. One can only say that both teachings must be true and ultimately in their coexistence are nothing other than the highest way of expressing that an absolute God and a world distinct from him, yet real, can coexist because they actually do coexist.[2]

This is highest mystery. Before such mystery, we are compelled to remain tongue-tied and silent. The question has to be asked as to the theological grounds which require 'an absolute sovereignty of

God's freedom over human freedom', granted God's gift of human freedom. But that query veers towards vast complexities of theological system-building, a detour we cannot take here. For us, the question remains whether, if tongue-tied and silent before such mystery, we must not also stammer, while aware of the inadequacy of our stammering.

The issue here is not to look at all the possible ways in which divine and human action might be imaged. The appeal to the analogy of 'the human relations of parent to child, lawgiver to subject, judge to judged' can be used to throw light on possible questions of principle.[3] But it raises two dangers. One is the danger of trivializing and fatuity. Can analogies which point to lessons we can learn, or the good which can emerge from suffering, and the like, be mentioned credibly in contexts involving deep human suffering and anguish, whether on an individual or national scale? What happens to such analogies confronted with the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust? Here, surely, we can only speak of God's immense anger at the evil, of God's infinite grief for the victims; and we can only be silent as to why God was powerless to prevent such horror. The example of the book of Job cautions us against any attempt to encompass inexplicable evil in words. In this aspect of Job's case, both friends and Job failed; the answer does not lie in the dogmas of the friends, nor in Job's longing for adversarial debate with God. The second danger is the risk of trespassing on mystery. We have no analogies for an absolute sovereignty over human freedom which nevertheless leaves the human will absolutely free. Where this is claimed, it is sheerest mystery, far exceeding all attempt at explanation or clarification beyond simply setting the boundaries to understanding.

Some aspects of the picture—I: options for our language

Silence and mystery. If we believe that God has effectively retained absolute sovereignty over human freedom, there is little we can say about the 'why' for what happens in our world. If the ultimate control is God's, it should be apparent to us that we know next to nothing of the reasons governing the exercise of that control in its myriad specific instances. There is no point in language of God's anger or grief. Where there is absolute sovereignty, these words make little sense. Faith can correctly build up a picture of the parameters of this absolute sovereignty: benevolent creation, a deep and committed love, an ultimately right outcome. Faith cannot

enter into the details. There faith must be silent—mystery must be accepted with silence.

Words and inadequacy. At the same time, it is a human imperative to speak. The relationship with God is too important for faith to be reduced to silence in matters so central to existence. The very body-spirit reality of our human existence requires us to find words to express what is innermost to our being. If words are to be used, analogy is essential and the primary analogy has to be human relationships and human emotions—language of love and fidelity, of grief and anger, the language of Old and New Testament. The safeguard, both for human honesty and respect for the creator God, is constantly to be aware of the inadequacy of any language we may use. But speak we must; we can no other. Yet our speech will always be in human figures and we must always reckon with its inadequacy before the mystery and trancendence of God.

Some aspects of the picture—II: conclusions for our theological outlook

Anger in God. If we are to speak of God's love, we have to speak of God's anger and God's grief. How can the utterly horrendous happenings of human history, exemplified above all by the Holocaust, not be spoken of as causing immense divine anger? As we shift our gaze from crimes against humanity to those against communities, nations, or races, and then on to the violence visited on individuals in uncounted ways, how is it possible not to speak of God's anger? Where the actions are not those of sin and oppression but of frailty and failure, how can we not speak of God's grief at the folly of those whom we believe God so deeply loves?

Anger at God. With the amount of suffering and misery in our world, whether of national extent or individual intensity, it is hardly surprising that real anger is often felt towards God. How dare God have created such a world? Why does God not act to right such wrong? How dare God be powerless in such situations? Theologically appropriate or not, such anger is there. Emotions are not constrained by logic or theology, although they are related to our attitudes and basic beliefs. Where anger is felt towards God, it needs to be accepted, experienced, and expressed; only then can it be dealt with helpfully. It may be only when acceptance is felt in the act itself of expressing fierce anger that unconditional love is experienced and known. But the danger of too blithe an acceptance of such anger is too facile an assumption of God's responsibility

for what has gone amiss. That may be most unfair to God. It is also unfair to sufferers trapped in attitudes or basic beliefs which may not appropriately mirror God's reality.

In the silence of mystery, the place for anger at God is ambiguous. Where God is believed to be in absolute control, there is scope for anger; but where God is also believed to be absolutely loving, incapable of harming us, there is no reason for anger. In the inadequacy of words, where it makes no sense to speak of absolute sovereignty, it makes little sense to direct anger at God. If we do not attribute direct responsibility to God, why should we direct anger at God? It is logical enough to be angry with God for having brought into being a universe such as ours. But there again we must recognize the inadequacy of our words and the reality that we do not know if a better world could have been created with potential for human life.

Where the powerlessness of God is assumed, the rug is largely pulled from under anger at God. It is hard to be angry with a God who grieves at our pain. Where that anger is present, however, it must first be felt and handled creatively. After that is time enough to reflect on the theology underlying it all.

Unconditional love and anger. In all the complexity of theological reflection, a relatively simple choice has to be made between two fundamental metaphors we use of God. The choice really cannot be avoided and is immensely significant for a believer's attitude towards God and life. The choice: whether God is thought of primarily as judge or lover.

The Old Testament has been unjustly burdened with the God of wrath. The New Testament offers a mix of texts, although the balance tilts towards the image of lover. The core of faith, inspired by the parables, aided by the Johannine letters and abetted by Paul, has always opted for the primacy of the metaphor of lover. But the trappings of religious practice, in attitude and prayer and ritual, have all too often brought the metaphor of judge to the fore. It is a much needed grace in our threatened generation that the metaphor of God as lover has once again been given its due primacy.

Thought of as lover, God must be spoken of as angered and angry, for anger is the appropriate response to injustice inflicted on those who are loved. Thought of as lover, God must be spoken of as grieving and saddened, for grief and sadness are the appropriate response when those who are loved suffer or sin. Our

human response to the same situations is one of sorrow and honest shame. Love does not prevent the pain and hurt when there has been betrayal; love offers forgiveness, the healing of hurt, and the deepened bonding of relationship. As Second Isaiah marvellously characterizes God:

> I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins (Isai 43,25).

The metaphor of God as lover does not take away human responsibility for the consequences of our choices. If we act stupidly or destructively, we are still loved, but our own selves, our lives or the lives of others are destructively affected—now, and perhaps into eternity. The human seriousness of life is not diminished by the metaphor of God as lover. Indeed, as we allow the conviction of our being unconditionally loved by God to deepen, every instant of life becomes indefinitely precious—to experience that love in all the depth of life while there is yet time. To be unconditionally loved by God is no licence for lesser living or evil-doing, unless the shallowness of one's understanding of love is intolerably thin. There is no greater bond than love that knows no bounds.

Just as there is a place for the human response of shame and sorrow, so there is a place for anger and the fear of anger. We know the reality of anger between those who deeply love—and its value. We fear to anger those we love, partly because of the pain and hurt we cause them, partly too because we fear to erode and perhaps lose their love. We desire not to anger those who love us; how much stronger that desire when the lover is God.

In these reflections, we have not finished our puzzle and filled in the whole picture; not all options have been canvassed. But we have looked closely at some of the pieces and how they do or do not fit together. Confusion may be lessened and the expression of our faith enhanced by bringing the language we may and must use of God into sharp focus against that background of theological understanding where mystery remains. Responsible acceptance of God's unconditional love immeasurably deepens and enlivens our relationship with God. Recognition of what is left in uncomprehended silence keeps intact respect for the mystery of God.

NOTES

[1] For a fuller discussion of this aspect of prophetic theology, see chapter 13 of my *The study companion to Old Testament literature* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1989).

[2] Rahner, Karl: *Theological investigations, Volume XXI: Science and Christian faith* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1988), p 5.

[3] See, for example, Mann, William E.: 'God's freedom, human freedom, and God's responsibility for sin', pp 182–210 in *Divine & human action: essays in the metaphysics of theism*, edited by Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1988), esp. pp 207–9.