

Palm Sunday: St John Passion
14 April 2019.

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

 On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.
R S Thomas, The Crossing.

There is no God in Heaven
And there is no Hell below
So says the great professor
Of all there is to know
But I've had the invitation
That a sinner can't refuse
And it's almost like salvation
It's almost like the blues.

Leonard Cohen, Almost like the blues.

There are, it seems, some inescapable facts about the human condition. We are capable of inflicting great destruction on others and immersing ourselves in bitter hatreds. We divide ourselves by building walls and by restricting people we don't like in ghettos, in the mind as well as physically. And then we are equally capable of rising above the swamp by extending our hands across the nations, building bridges, and expressing our deepest longings and aspirations in art and poetry and music.

God doesn't always help matters. He can be co-opted by malefactor and benefactor alike, to shore up discriminatory prejudice as much as inspiring universal values of peace, compassion and love. That is, of course, an all too human response to the intervention of God in our lives. He either backs us up or shows us another way. In a sense, you pay your money and you take your choice as far as God is concerned.

But then we have the cross to think about. The cross is symbolic of many things, but particularly of the degradation and despair to which humanity can sink. Love may look like this, but we can still pin it to some rough-hewn piece of wood and stick it high on a hill for all to see. It is the action of a distorted humanity, a humanity that is all too ready to co-opt God into its front-line.

The cross, then, is a repugnant human action. But it is also, and at the same time, a response, a response by a God who will not be so easily co-opted by the grim hatreds that sustain the cross's power. 'The son watched them. Let me go there, he said.' And the paradox of love is seen most keenly through the thorn and the nail, for it is God's utter refusal to give into distortion and despair that signifies the cross's greatest proclamation. It is from the heart of the cross's darkness that this resonant echoing emanates. And this gives the cross its backward and forward-looking perspective; human folly and divine grace. It is the fulcrum around which the human action and the divine response revolves.

This has knock-on effects. We can, as it happens, catch the wave of the divine response. Bach could see through the fog of the cross: from swirling string opening with that plaintive oboe threnody to hope-filled final chorale, his rendition of John's Passion echoes the evangelist's triumphant exploration of the cross and its meaning.

Equally, the poet R S Thomas could see the durable simplicity of the cross and its undemonstrative message of hope firmly planted in the often bleak landscape of his imagination. And that often misunderstood prophet of melancholia, Leonard Cohen, betrayed a deceptively honest and grown-up attitude to death and dying in lyrics that could subvert death's ice-cold grip on our sensibilities.

Bach, R S Thomas, Leonard Cohen. Three examples of how the *fact* of the cross can evoke creativity and possibility as much as symbolise death and destruction. And that has to be the context by which we enter the cross's shadow. For sure, the crowd will spit out its venom in Bach's *turba* scenes in a few moments' time, but that venom is captured in music of sublime drama, quality and effect. Not that Bach anaesthetises the horror of the passion, but the very fact of this music, and, for that matter, the R S Thomas poem and the Leonard Cohen lyric means that the human imagination, the human spirit, can engage with the fact of God's response to curtail the malevolence of the cross and its rootedness in our condition.

We can arise above the darkness and the despair, the hatred and the prejudice. For the very highest human aspiration kisses the hem of the glory of God, and it is the cross, the descent into darkness and the refusal to let the darkness have the last word, that evokes and inspires such a leap of the imagination. And this music proves it.