

## **‘and Sarah laughed’**

*Genesis 18:1-14*

Recently a person confided that he no longer believed many of the things that the church he grew up thought important. Trying to be more specific he said that in those days issues were presented as black or white. But now what he accepted as true then, he no longer thought was. He said that although most of his friends and relatives were not religious in any way, they were still very kind and good people. Listening, it struck me that the views he expressed are shared by many.

Hearing him reminded me of something that I have thought about over the years. As a minister I am aware of movements in the history of thought that have brought us to the situation he described. These movements are discussed in academic circles but are not shared with congregations. How many of us know, for example, that there was a great kerfuffle in the 1960’s when some theologians wrote about ‘the death of God’? How many of us know that the ‘death of God’ had been announced by philosophers for at least two centuries before the 1960’s? It is a shame that congregations have not known of these things because knowing about them would help them understand where we are at today culturally and religiously. Furthermore, knowing where we are at may help us to see what Christianity needs to do in this time. So what is meant by ‘the death of God’?

The history of the ‘death of God’ begins with the many wars of religion in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One of these wars was the English civil war that began with Puritanism in conflict with Catholicism. I won’t name these wars, but their effect made people realised that religious passion destroys social peace. Before these wars it was believed that Christianity guaranteed the unity of society and its peaceful existence. Furthermore the church was the institution that defined what was morally right and good for people to do. But the brutal wars between Catholics and Protestants, even if Princes used the wars for their own purposes, undermined the authority of Christianity. God and the church no longer was *the* foundation that guaranteed peace and unity.

Because Christianity had shown itself to be a source of social chaos and suffering, instead of being a source of peace and unity, people sought other foundations on which to build unity and peace. In the centuries leading up to the present different foundations were suggested. In the eighteenth century people looked for truth and morality in human nature. This was the idea that, in their natural state, human beings are peaceful and moral. People spoke about the 'noble savage' - a phrase that expressed the view that human beings are innately moral. Associated with this view was the assumption that human beings are naturally reasonable. When it proved that human beings did not always act reasonably, an alternative foundation was proposed. This was the idea that our feelings are the truest and best things about us. If we can get in touch with our deepest feelings these can be a foundation for unity and peace. Science, and particularly technology, also came to be seen as being objective, that is above the prejudices of individuals, and therefore a foundation for unity and peace.

The attempt to replace God with human nature, with human reason, with human feeling, with a science that reduced men and women to machine-like organisms, is what the 'death of God' means. People sought a foundation for unity and peace in these things because God had failed in what people thought he should do. Because of this failure God had 'died'. And it is true. Some kind of God had died!

But all the attempts to replace God - with reason, with feeling, with technology - were shown to have failed. It was the unimaginable carnage, brutality, and suffering caused by the first world war that led people to see that these foundations had completely failed. But there was no returning to God because he had been implicated in the unspeakable violence. After all, troops from all sides were sent out of the trenches after praying with their chaplains. So, if reason, feelings, or science cannot be trusted to deliver peace and justice, can anything?

Some philosophers say that in this century, which is described as postmodern, people have given up on this question. There is nothing that can be trusted. There is only the *individual* who must fashion her own morality and meaning. Because there are no universal truths everything becomes relative. Beliefs, in this situation, are like one's servant, someone to be hired and fired as the fancy takes you. Moreover when everything is relative the postmodern

person has no difficulty in holding contrary beliefs simultaneously. Someone, for example, once informed a meeting that he had extreme political views, but held them moderately.

In a postmodern time, as I said, there are no universal truths or beliefs. There are only self-determined 'rights' In such a situation the Christianity that provided a morality, that told us what was black and what was white, is gone. And clearly you don't need to be Christian to be kind or nice. Nor do we need Christianity to provide political unity. That God is dead!

I want to say two things in response to the 'death of God'. The first is that it is a good thing that God the guarantor of morality is dead. This is the case because Christianity is not about moral uplift or political unity. The bible has little or nothing to say about responsible citizenship. The bible shows no passion for social consensus. Instead it tells us that these things will pass away as a new order is established. Understood in this way 'the death' of God brings new freedom to Christianity.

The second thing to be said is this: From the beginning of the bible to its end we hear about how God brings forth new life from what is hopeless, what is barren. Sarah, who is well beyond child-bearing, is promised that she will birth a child who will become the father of a great nation. Not unreasonably she laughs. Christianity starts from a crucified body. From this God brings resurrection life. Resurrection life dissolves familiar forms of social life so that, transformed, they can be reborn in just and compassionate communities. The crucified God, the biblical God, is planted in the most barren places on this earth in solidarity with the broken and powerless. Seen in its proper context, then, what is called 'the death of God', is freedom for Christian communities. We are not the moral guardians of anyone or anything. Christianity is not responsible for social cohesion. We are free, then, to be small groups that gather around a risen crucified God and the new order that has dawned. This is what faith asks of us now. Like Abraham and Sarah it asks it of us in our old age. In God's strength this is not beyond us.

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