

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Fr Peter Groves

I Peter 4.13

Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Die Mitte der Zeit – literally, the middle of time - is the name of a highly influential book published in 1954 by the Biblical scholar Hans Conzelmann. Its subject is the two books attributed to St Luke – his gospel, and the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, the English translation is rather boringly entitled “The Theology of St Luke”. Now, as I’m quite sure you’re all highly familiar with the details of 1950s German New Testament scholarship, I won’t rehearse Conzelmann’s arguments in any detail. But his basic point is that the history of salvation should be divided into three – the period before Christ, that is the time of the Old Testament; the earthly ministry of Jesus himself; and the time of the church. Conzelmann was arguing against the view that the second coming was seen as imminent. Instead, he suggests, Luke is recasting the history of God’s acts and preparing us for the

long haul, which is God's working out of his purpose from year to year and century to century.

The middle of time is, in many ways, that long haul. The church is living out its Christian vocation, whilst also always looking to the future in hope, knowing that God will in his good time bring all things to completion. That looking forward is, of course, a commitment to trust in the unknown, to live in the present by faith without knowing the course of the future.

This particular Sunday in the church's year is, in its own sense, one which falls in the middle of time. We have celebrated the Ascension of Jesus, the taking up into the Godhead the humanity which has triumphed over sin and death. And we await the celebration of Pentecost, the coming of the promised gift which is God's Holy Spirit, that which will breathe life into the church and hence animate Christ's body on earth. But today, we are in neither of those places. We are in between,

looking forward in hope, and celebrating our faith in the God who will bring all things to completion.

Once again, faith has had a difficult week. The senseless slaughter of the innocent in the name of so called religion has rightly left us all shocked into a silence broken only by tears. Whilst the events close to home have naturally affected us most deeply, the murder of a similar number of similarly young people in Egypt serves as a reminder that hatred and evil are not a British problem as much as a human one. Attacks upon children are always unimaginably appalling, and attacks upon Christians such as the Copts are all too common but not the less shocking for that.

Our reading from the first letter of Peter began with some uncomfortable words: Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. Too often in the past the church has contented itself with telling those who suffer that all will be well in heaven, so never mind. For any except the

heartless, such a response is not an option. But neither are we particularly well served by any of the traditional attempts of what theologians and philosophers call “theodicy”, a word whose etymology suggests it describe the act of justifying God.

A theodicy is an answer to the so called problem of evil, a defence of God’s goodness and power in the face of the horrors of our world. And so theodicy sounds a good idea in abstract, but its problem is just that, it is always abstract. Theorising about the love of God and producing arguments which win over our intellectual opponents has little to do with the Christian imperative to confront and to embrace suffering. We must always be on our guard against the temptation to say that evil and suffering are OK, because of some greater purpose. Of course, as Christians, we believe in the greater purpose, but it absolutely does not follow from that that evil is OK.

The epistle speaks of our sharing Christ's sufferings. This should give us a clue, for the example of Christ is not simply one of passivity and love in the face of violence and hatred, it is one of engaging with and enfolding oneself into the reality of suffering. The Christian God does not sit at a great distance dispensing punishment or reward, blessing or thunderbolts as it pleases him. The God of Christianity comes among us and unites himself to our suffering not to diminish it, not to make it OK, not to magic it into something good, but just to share it, to enfold it into this own life, to subject evil and suffering to the reality of infinite love.

This is the Christian answer to evil and suffering. Not answer in the sense of solution, a theory or argument which makes everything all right. But answer in the sense of response: we do not understand the mystery of evil, but we confront it with the love of God, with God's response to agony and hatred, the cross of Jesus Christ. This answer is, in one sense, not an answer at all. There is no

Christian call to justify evil, there is only a Christian call to follow Christ, to share his suffering, to take his example as basic to our understanding of the world, however partial, however frightening. We should rage at suffering and evil, just as Christ did. And we should trust in the mercy and goodness of God. Just as Christ did, even at his lowest point, in the bewildered faith of Gethsemane and the agony of Good Friday.

Being in the middle of time on this particular Sunday, waiting for the coming of the Spirit, reminds us that the whole of Christian life is in the middle of time. We look forward to God's true purposes not knowing what they are, we live as Christians in the life of the Spirit knowing that what that means is that we do not know, we are not certain, we are rather being led, being drawn onward by love and onward into love. Agnosticism is always an aspect of Christian faith, not in the traditional sense of being undecided with regard to God, but in the more basic sense that we do not claim to know all that there is to be known. In the

famous words of the Letter to the Hebrews, faith is “the assurance of things hoped for”, it is a way of living that takes on trust the love of God, takes it on trust for the future because that love is known and lived in the here and now by all who encounter Jesus Christ.

The life of faith is always lived in the middle of time, but it is always, also, life eternal. In the gospel of John, Jesus teaches us that true life, eternal life, is not measured by a long distance of years, but by our sharing in the love of the Father and the Son. This is the life lived beyond death, the life to which we are called, the challenge to which we respond by walking in faith and trust, being led by the Spirit into the truth which we cannot yet understand. Jesus words are clear: “This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”