

Sermon Trinity IV Without whom nothing is strong....

O God...without whom nothing is strong. Just meditate on that line from today's Collect for a moment. Reflect on how strong *nothing* actually is. For nothingness, denial, the void, the abyss is the very strong and potent force of evil. I am not talking about abstractions here. This is not theoretical. Let me give some practical reminders from our own times of the strong, destructive power of nothing – that is of what happens to men's minds when they deny God.

I sat in the garden last Sunday reading Martin Gilbert's *History of the 20th Century*. What came across sickeningly was the sheer depravity of those three 20th century dictators: Stalin, Hitler and Mao Tse Tung: God-deniers all three. It wasn't just the fact that Hitler murdered six million, Stalin slaughtered perhaps thirty million and Mao as many as seventy million. All three delighted in murder and torture. They took pleasure in using pain and terror as the main instruments of their political aims. Gilbert quotes from the sayings of all three – all three in spasms of ecstasy urging, *Kill, torture, terrorise!*

And we should not forget Lenin who wrote to Kursky, Commissar for Justice: *Please expand the use of shootings* -- this at the time when hundreds of thousands were being murdered every month. During the great famine of 1920, Lenin wrote: *Now that millions are swelling from starvation it's a good time to confiscate all the church valuables.*

We should be thankful for that there were those who dared to defy these evil men and to wage just wars against them. It was the century in which more people were killed in war than in all the previous history of the whole world. I reflect on this when I hear so many people talking about progress, of how much better modern times are compared with what went before. The word *medieval* is used everywhere as a synonym for primitive barbarity. But the middle ages were a picnic compared with Hitler's Holocaust, Stalin's Gulag and Mao's Cultural Revolution.

Those men were the enemies of civilisation but – worse even than their terrors – was the nothingness which *we* were perpetrating within civilisation itself. In the 1930s, when Hitler and Stalin were murdering their millions, some of the highest placed people in British and American intellectual and academic life were teaching their students that there is no such thing as goodness, that morality is only a matter of emotional preference, that there are no absolute standards by which we judge between good and evil.

There were two philosophers and two books in particular which promoted this denial. In England A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) and in America *The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms* written in 1937 by C.L. Stevenson. Both men declared that to claim that anything is morally good is merely to say *I approve of it*. But *you* may approve of the opposite. When there is no standard for judging between right and wrong, good and bad except emotional preference, then both Ayer and Stevenson were forced to agree that an instrument of moral persuasion might just as well be the use of a baseball bat or the thumbscrews.

The emotive view of ethics has long since been philosophically discredited but not, unfortunately, before it leaked out of the ivory tower and was adopted universally. In practice our society operates on the basis that there are no moral absolutes. You are, as the saying goes, *free to make up your own mind*. This leads to the dereliction of reason, to depravity and to moral and social chaos.

The world of literature and high culture became even more depraved as the intellectual elite began to admire and bestow honour on writers who wove this nihilistic ethical doctrine into their novels. There's time only to mention a couple of them. In France Jean Paul Sartre said that in morals it doesn't matter *what* you decide only *that* you decide. Anything. So his hero at the end of his fictional trilogy *The Roads to Freedom* ends up on a roof machine-gunning the innocent. That's Existentialism. Sartre sneered at God and said that life is a sickness: *La Nausee*.

And then there was Samuel Beckett, the great idol of the literary culture vultures in Britain. Beckett performed the ultimate irrational trick – that of hating God while denying God's existence. His pretentious, witless black comedy *Waiting for Godot* was a deliberate parody of Simone Weil's mystical essay *Waiting on God*.

Beckett jibes that Christ was lucky: *Where he was it was warm and dry and they crucified quick*. Lies. The Gospels tell us Christ hung on the Cross for at least three hours. *Nothing is funnier than unhappiness*, Beckett chuckles. The man is a sadist. The intellectuals loved it and placed Beckett on a pedestal, way above criticism.

Stevenson, Ayer, Sartre and Beckett were the leading darkneses in the destruction of Christian faith and values in Europe. Their poisonous intellectual posturing and satanic destruction of all values has produced the vicious society in which we all now live. This is the society without God. It is bound to be a culture of death. *O God, without whom nothing is strong*. Indeed.

So we have abortion as a means of contraception: 200,000 unborn children aborted every year to dispose of the results of fornication. Embryos created – and inevitably killed - for the sole purpose of scientific experiments. Schemes to legalise euthanasia. How long before aged and confused people in hospitals wonder whether the nurse is coming round with their vitamin pills or the lethal injection? These policies – what are they but the policies of Hitler and Stalin and Mao: enemies of mankind whom our fathers and grandfathers fought to the death?

O God, without whom nothing is strong! We now inhabit an atheistic society, a culture of death. Lies and the father of lies. Grinning hypocrisy and sham. We have a so-called *war on drugs* yet we award knighthoods to drug-addict rock stars. Music itself used to mean Bach and Beethoven. Now *music* is a word everywhere used to refer to the audible filth of rock and pop.

The whole satanic insistence that there are no standards of judgement beyond personal preference has led to the debauching of art, of turning art into anti-art: vacuous installations, unmade beds, a light bulb flickering on and off – and other exhibitions too obscene to be mentioned even from the pulpit. When there are no real values, when there are no absolute standards of judgement, then we must expect our

education system to collapse too. And that is just what has happened. *O God, without whom nothing is strong!*

The Christians who are left must ask what is to be done. The first thing is to put our depravity into its historical context. Then we shall know what is to be done. For mankind has lived through this culture of death many times. When we read the Bible, when we look at the history of western civilisation, we seem to observe a definite cycle of events. First there is a vision of a people in captivity and torment. Then the prophet announces that God will deliver them. God does deliver them. And next he gives them some guidelines so that they don't get into the same mess again.

Example: the children of Israel in Egypt. They are delivered by Moses. They receive the Ten Commandments. For a time they are overjoyed and grateful. But as soon as their difficulties are behind them, it is time out of mind. They worship the Golden Calf. They turn from God and debauch themselves. Without God, *nothing* becomes strong. This always leads to what the prophets call *God's judgement*. This is a misleading phrase, for God does not punish people directly. Rather their punishment is just the natural consequence of their turning from God.

Turning from God always leads to catastrophe. We are today approaching the catastrophic stage in the historical cycle. It has happened so many times before that we ought to be able to read the signs. The Israelites carried off into captivity in Babylon, only to return decades later to build the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The desert fathers fleeing to the wilderness and living in obscurity and prayer, keeping the faith alive until the times became more propitious.

This is where we are, near the catastrophic stage. Eight months before the outbreak of the Second World War, the last great catastrophe, T.S. Eliot wrote,

For this immediate future, perhaps for a long way ahead, the continuity of culture may have to be maintained by a very small number of people indeed – and these not necessarily equipped with worldly advantages.

Eliot was talking about the same experience spoken of by Isaiah the prophet when he referred to *the remnant*. The same experience as that of the hermits and anchorites who, through hard times, kept the faith almost in secret. We are not at the mercy of nothingness. We have our task. It is to be faithful, to keep the reality of God ever before us, to receive the Sacraments and to pray without ceasing.