

# The Problem with Almighty God

Psalm 66: 8-20 & John 14: 15-21

*Sixth Sunday of Easter/ 1<sup>st</sup> May 2005/ Sacrament of Holy Communion*

In 1915, the Anglican priest G. A. Studdert-Kennedy (1883-1929) left the shores of England, crossed the channel to bring the assurance of the Gospel to men fighting in the trenches of northern France. He was in France for about two months without hearing a gun fired or seeing the horror of the trenches when he made his way to a base hospital to visit with an officer recovering from serious wounds. The conversation eventually turned to religion. “What I want to know, Padre,” he said to Studdert-Kennedy, “is, what is God like?” The officer confessed that he never really thought about it much before the war, he was not religious, was confirmed as an Anglican, took Communion sometimes with his wife. In the context of the war he found himself profoundly connected to the human race and concerned for its welfare. Concern about humanity caused him to wonder what God was like. He said, “That is your real business, Padre; you ought to know.”

Studdert-Kennedy looked up and saw a crucifix hanging over the officer’s bed. He pointed to it and said, “Yes, I think I can tell you. God is like that.” Good answer, but it was not enough for the officer who demanded religion to be upfront and honest about humanity and life. The officer turned toward Studdert-Kennedy with a face full of disappointment said:

What do you mean? . . . God cannot be like that. God is Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, Monarch of the world, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, Whose will sways all the world. That is a battered, wounded, bleeding figure, nailed to a cross and helpless, defeated by the world and broken in all but spirit. That is not God; it is part of God’s plan: God’s mysterious, repulsive, and apparently perfectly futile plan for saving the world from sin. I cannot understand the plan, and it appears to be a thoroughly bad one, because it has not saved the world from sin. It has been an accomplished fact now for nearly two thousand years, and we have sung hymns about God’s victory, and yet the world is full of sin, and now there is this filthy war. I’m sick of this cant. You have not been up there, Padre, and you know nothing about it. I tell you that cross does not help me a bit; it makes things worse. I admire Jesus of Nazareth; I think He was splendid, as my friends at the front are splendid – splendid in their courage, patience, and unbroken spirit. But I asked you not what Jesus *was* like, but what God *is* like, God Who willed His death in agony upon the Cross, and Who

apparently wills the wholesale slaughter in this war. Jesus Christ I know and admire, but what is God Almighty? To me He is still the unknown God.<sup>1</sup>

What would you have said to him?

I first came across these words in February, reading Studdert-Kennedy's journal and right from the start the officer's words seared my spirit. They have stayed with me through Lent and this Eastertide; I find myself returning to them often – in adult education, in Bible study, in conversations. The officer's rebuke is piercing and rightly so, because it exposes the failure of the church of his day to adequately communicate the meaning of the Gospel and offer an image of God that truly reflects what we find in Hebrew and Christian scriptures and how it speaks to the human condition. We're not doing much better today and I'll get to that in a minute.

What Studdert-Kennedy discovered working in the trenches, listening to the soldiers, living with them, praying for them and watching them die is that many actually deepened their faith commitment. But even more lost their faith and trust in God altogether, questioned the effectiveness of the church because it could not prevent the war and eventually blessed it, questioned the presence of a loving, faithful God in the sight of so much bloodshed. He discovered in the trenches that their images of God were informed more by the culture than by the Bible, informed more by philosophies alien to the Bible, ideas about God that made their way into their consciousness – and ours – originating with the Greek. When they spoke of God, it was what we might call the *God of the Absolutes*. We often think of God as Almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing, all-whatever. The God of the Absolutes – is completely in control, nothing takes place without this God's permission or will. But it doesn't take long for reality to question these views of God, unless one wants to argue that God is a sadist. The problem, Studdert-Kennedy, said is this notion of *God Almighty*, understandings of God which more reflect the God of Plato (c.427-347 B. C.) or Aristotle (383-322, B.C.) than the God of Moses and of Jesus.

In the trenches of pastoral ministry, listening to the voices of the church, living with you, praying for you, overhearing your conversations, what is said and not said, wrestling with your questions, watching you come into the world and watching you leave, the subtext is the same, we want to know, "*What is God like?*" I hear you asking, "*Who is God?*" "How do we know God is forgiving, loving?"

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<sup>1</sup> G. A. Studdert-Kennedy, *The Hardest Part* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918), xiv-xv.

“If God is so loving, then why all the pain and sorrow? If God is all-powerful, then why can’t God heal my child or stop my husband from drinking too much or save our marriage?” “God can do it if God wants to,” we say to ourselves, but then God doesn’t. Then we say to ourselves, “Maybe it is something I have done or didn’t do.” You can see how this litany of questions takes us down a path of considerable anxiety, confusion and disbelief. You see, here we find ourselves getting into trouble with our images of God – Almighty, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-whatever. Our images of God can get us in trouble; we find them inadequate to the complexity of our world and they come up against the world as it is, like when we are overcome by waves of tsunamis in Southeast Asia or towers collapsing in Manhattan or thousands of children becoming orphans every day in Africa, or when the call comes from the doctor with your test results. *Why God?* These have been my questions, too.

But I wonder if, at times, we ask the wrong questions. The officer made a major theological blunder, one which happens a lot even today, leading folks into all kinds of theological quagmires and bewilderment. The officer separated Jesus from God. He had an image of God uninformed by Jesus. A Christian cannot separate Jesus from God, nor God from Jesus. They need to be held together. For us the correct question is not, “What or who is God?” Rather, “*What was Jesus showing us about God? Who is the God of Jesus Christ?*”

This is what Jesus was getting at in this farewell discourse. He wants his disciples to know that if we look to him we will see who God is. Jesus’ life participates in the life of the Father, and that through the Holy Spirit Jesus’ life participates in our life and our lives together participate in God. Jesus’ love for God and God’s love for Jesus, our love for Jesus and our love for others are all connected. The Spirit draws us into this relationship. Jesus wants us to know God, he draws us right to the very heart of God, and what we find at the heart of God is a cross. In fact, the cross makes no sense if we think of God only as Almighty. The cross demands that we change the way we think about and relate to God. As Studdert-Kennedy came to know in the trenches, “It’s always the Cross in the end – God, not Almighty, but God the Father, with a Father’s sorrow and a Father’s weakness, which is the strength of love; God splendid, suffering, crucified – Christ.”<sup>2</sup> We serve a crucified God. Jesus wants us to see that God is like a Father or Mother who willingly suffers with God’s children and demonstrates strength by becoming *weak*. God is found in the midst of human suffering – not beyond it or

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<sup>2</sup> Studdert-Kennedy, p. 14.

controlling it, not manipulating it, not dishing it, but *participating* in it and *suffering* through it, meeting us in the trenches.

But why doesn't God bring about an end to the sorrow, the pain, the suffering, take away the trenches? You're not going to find an answer to these questions; it's not what the Bible is about. But what Jesus made clear is that here *in the trenches*, in our battles we will not be left orphaned or alone, we will meet him here. In the place of crucifixion there is resurrection. The place of crucifixion becomes the place of resurrection. This is the good news.

This table is a sign that at the place of crucifixion there is resurrection. In the flesh – in flesh and blood – in our lives we will meet the Lord of Life and then we will know what God is like.

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