

Olympian Gods

Michaelmas Term, 2014

12th October, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Athena

19th October, Professor Morna D. Hooker, Artemis

26th October, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Apollo

2nd November, Michael Bywater, Commemoration Service (forthcoming)

9th November, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Ares

16th November, Dr Judy Weiss, Blaming the Gods

23rd November, Professor Judith Lieu, Hermes

25th December, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Christmas Day Reflection

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Athena

12th October

(Bible Readings: Job / I Corinthians 1)

This term we are looking at some of the Olympian gods, or more specifically, looking at Christian belief through the lens of the Olympian gods. Everyone knows, of course, that the Olympians are the sociopathic family from Mount Olympus, who live on a diet of tinned rice pudding and divinely supercharged Red Bull and – not surprisingly - the Olympians have (literally) titanic anger management issues. So what on earth can they tell us about Christianity? The point is not to follow the flood of recent literature about the wisdom of the Greeks, but to see how Christianity appears from an Olympian perspective.

This evening, we are looking in particular at Athena. Athena is the devious, warmongering, racial xenophobe who's become associated with... Wisdom. And at the beginning of a new academic year and for many – your first term at Cambridge, what better place to begin than with the goddess of Wisdom? Athena, divine patron of Athens – which probably explains her links with wisdom and philosophy, as well as her patronage of state-sanctioned war: she is the hater of Troy, helper of Odysseus and Achilles, violent, deceptive – the goddess of wisdom!

The earliest literature we have are in the writings of Eighth Century BC poet, Homer. His two major works, the Iliad and the Odyssey, taken together pedal the dual ideology of city states. Successful War and a successful household. The Iliad is the story of Greek city states uniting to do and do war with the city of Troy, and the Odyssey is the story of one hero's attempt to return home from Troy. In the Iliad, Athena deceives Hector into accepting a fair duel with Brad Pitt – and then she cheats, by ganging up with Brad Pitt against Hector: her cheating is the only reason Achilles has become seen as the archetypal warrior. In the Odyssey, Athena guides Sean Bean home from Troy, so he can rebuild his happy, stable household by butchering those terrible people who, outrageously, think he's dead simply because he's not been seen since he went to war 20 years earlier.

The Iliad concerns questions of how to conduct yourself in war; the Odyssey paints a picture of what it means to belong to a household, an oikos, the social glue that kept Greek society together. War and Economics, Foreign policy and Domestic policy, in Roman language, Mars and Venus, in biblical language, the beast and the whore, the Iliad and the Odyssey. And Athena plays arguably the most significant role in both these works, and it is in these works there is a type of wisdom that is peddled ferociously. It is the wisdom of the city state, an ideology conducive to the running of an empire. It is the wisdom of the winners, the expansionists, the privileged. The ideology that simmers through Homer's writings could not be more different from the driving force of Christian scripture.

Both serve as mythologies – not myth in the sense that these are fairy tales that never happened, but myths as ideologies that instil deep inside you a sense of your place in the cosmic hierarchy. In Homer, if you're a slave, then you do not question those above you in the celestial pecking order – be they freemen, nobles, kings, or gods. In Christian Scripture, that is precisely the cosmic hierarchy that comes under relentless and sustained assault – since it is not only kings, but every human being that is made in the image of God.

The authors of the Biblical texts were usually writing for a people buffeted between the great warring empires – and by the time of the New Testament, there is a deeply subversive, anti-imperial strand that characterises many of the

texts. Whatever we find in scripture, it is not wisdom – because you can pop out any high-sounding, self-contradictory gem of received truth and call it wisdom.

Wisdom does not get a good press in the Christian bible. In fact, the bible is pretty much against wisdom because wisdom suggests a fixed body of truth that doesn't exist, wisdom suggests a timeless set of concrete facts in a universe that is in flux. Yes, there is a whole genre in the bible that we call Wisdom literature, the authors who wrote it did not finish their work, stroke their beards and say, "I think I'll call that, Wisdom literature." A lot of it, in any case, amounts to advice like "the wise man never ties his shoe laces in revolving doors." And yes, of course, there are people we might consider wise – but not this static body of truth called "Wisdom." In fact, the book of Job which we heard, is from this genre of wisdom literature.

You know the story of Job. God is very happy with Job, so the devil approaches God and says, ok – if Job is so great, give me permission to mess his life up, because when I do that, he is bound to curse you. And God says, OK, help yourself – but don't kill him. So all these horrible and atrocious things happen to Job. He loses his sheep, his chickens, his wife... it comes in that order!

And in the midst of his misery, he has three friends who approach him armed with Wisdom. That is, each of them offers him a tidy formula to give meaning to his suffering: the first one says, oh, god punished you so you must have done something wrong – even if you don't know what it is, so go and have a good long look in the mirror. The second one says, you have sinned – so cause and effect – now you suffer. The third one says, Oh God must be testing you so just take it for what it is.

And Job rejects it all, he rejects every attempt to put some kind of a comforting label upon his suffering and instead he just sees it as suffering because that is what the world is – there is no equilibrium, or stability. He just ignores his friends and refuses to curse God. In other words, we see Job rejecting wisdom.

And at the end of the book, God speaks directly to Job, and says – well done for not listening to the wisdom of your friends. They were stupid – you were right, there is no deeper meaning to suffering.

And then comes this passage that we heard – where were you when I created... Now the way that is usually read is this: Job should be humble, because he wasn't present when God created everything, so – wind your neck in Job, and don't be obnoxious because I know everything and have always known everything. But this is not a great way to read the text. A far more satisfying view is the one offered by G.K.Chesterton – that God turns round and says – You think your life is a catastrophe? You should have been there at the beginning – the creation was a celestial catastrophe: I created a mess out of everything! This is a world of radical instability, and uncertainty, insecurity.

(Yes, I know that the creation story of genesis is usually told as a nice tidy order-out-of-chaos story, but I think that is also a misreading of the text, although that's a question for another day.)

No – God says that in this world of flux, and chaos, and upheaval and unfairness and evil and death, there is no stability, there is no safe place to stand, there is no objective concrete body of timeless godly wisdom. Instead, says God, there is me. And of course, as the story of scripture unfolds, believers are invited to encounter this god in particular ways. Always and invariably, Christian theology is not a body of correct truths or received wisdom – no absolute, eternal principles or values or foundations. Instead – there is only this God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and

if there is such a thing as wisdom then it comes only in dynamic encounter with this Christ as a pure event. This is the point of the New Testament reading – confronted with wisdom, Saint Paul and his friends declare that the key to making sense of the world, and finding our place within it, is to build our lives around a failed, publically humiliated political criminal.

That sounds disturbingly radical, and unstable – when of course, in a universe of chaos, we want to feel secure about where and who we are. But that is the role of wisdom. The Bible refuses to provide that. Adam and Eve grasped after wisdom when they grasped at the knowledge of good and evil, and looking then at the world through the received wisdom from the serpent, they end up withdrawing from one another behind fig leaves and withdrawing from God, who had to go looking for them. Anyone with an apple computer sees the apple has a bite taken from it, the knowledge of good and evil, the quest for wisdom...

No – the bible refuses to provide this thing called wisdom.

It is not only Steve Jobs, but Homer too gives us wisdom in bucket loads. In Iliad and Odyssey, in war and in domestic life, we are exhorted to know our place in the universe. When the historian Herodotus tells us of the significance of these two works in Greek society, they clearly carry the same weight as does the bible in Christian circles. There is an ideology that is drilled into the cultural psyche, a Wisdom in other words, that is a received Wisdom. That wisdom, as you will hear from me throughout the term, is that you should know your place in the cosmic hierarchy, that you should know your limits and think yourself no more or no less than you really are. Seen in this light, Christianity is a monstrous distortion, a destabilising aberration, an anti wisdom. As we approach Christmas, the liberating nature of this anti-wisdom should come into sharper focus.

Athena Intercessions

Lord as we think of wisdom, we see no timeless solution to all the world's problems, no absolute cure for the suffering of those abandoned to the bottom of the social ladder, no concrete set of rights and wrongs to guide individuals and nations. Instead we look to you, the peasant caught in the machinery of human power games, the tortured, criminalised and executed God – who remains present nevertheless.

So as we look to you, we see no easy solution to the growing unease created by the warring factions in the middle east. We see only the inevitability of innocent people, made in your image, subjected to violence, and hunger and displacement. And we pray not for some timeless wisdom to shine out, but for action that will protect the most helpless, challenge the most thoughtless, and silence the most violent.

Closer to home, we pray for those now embarking on their university careers,

May those who are homesick soon find themselves feeling thoroughly at home in this place.

May those with little belief in their own academic abilities, find themselves quickly encouraged by the fruits of their own hard work.

May those struggling to fit in socially, find themselves settling into the term with confidence.

You are the god whose being is expressed in loving communion, help us, we pray, to be in healthy communion with one another – within our families and those close to us, within our college amongst our colleagues, and in our political lives as citizens who must live in the light of others. Make us worthy of the community of your own disciples, and worthy of the prayer you thought them which we now pray together,

Professor Morna D. Hooker

Artemis

19th October

I was on holiday, and for the first time in many years, I had taken no work with me. There were no half-written lectures in my case, no books that needed to be reviewed, no proofs requiring urgent correction. I was determined to forget about work, and to enjoy exploring the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. And so I did. But then, on the final day of my holiday, I visited the Museum in Naples, where artefacts from those cities are displayed. Wandering through a room full of statues, on the way to the galleries I had come to visit,

I found myself confronted by a striking alabaster statue of Artemis of Ephesus, and suddenly I understood the significance of an obscure saying of St Paul that had puzzled commentators for centuries. So much for escaping work!

Artemis is the Greek version of the Roman goddess known as Diana, the goddess of hunting. Artemis was a somewhat fiercer figure, however. She, too, was the goddess of hunting, and is sometimes depicted with bow and arrows. But she was believed to have power over all the wild beasts, and is described in the Iliad as 'Mistress of the Beasts'. She did not just subdue them, however. No, she used them to establish her power. The supreme goddess Hera describes her as a lioness to women, whom Zeus allows her to destroy at her pleasure. The tragic cases in recent times of children being mauled to death by dogs, or larger animals trampling grown-ups to death, or sharks eating helpless swimmers, remind us of the damage that untamed animals can cause. A goddess who has power to unleash them on her enemies was, indeed, to be feared. It is hardly surprising if poets described invading armies, slaughtering their luckless victims, as wild animals. Psalmists and prophets in ancient Israel referred to the nation's enemies as 'wild beasts' – an image picked up by Lord Byron centuries later, when he described how 'The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold'.

Artemis, then, was a goddess to be feared, rather than loved. If she was on your side, all was well, but if she was against you, that was another story. Take a look at the picture of that statue in the museum at Naples. Some of its features are hard to decipher, but from the head hangs a veil which bears the heads of lions and griffins, and round her neck are the signs of the Zodiac. On her bust there are four rows of what have been described as 'rounded protuberances', which look like breasts, but which many scholars now argue are not breasts at all, but the scrota of bulls which have been sacrificed to the goddess. Certainly this would seem to be more in keeping with her character than breasts, which suggest the tenderness associated with a nursing mother. It seems that Artemis was believed to have the strength of at least fifteen bulls. The bottom half of her body is covered with rows of animal heads – lions, griffins, horses, bulls, and bees. These are some of the beasts whom Artemis controls and who are ready to do her will. She is a goddess of power and of aggression.

In the story we heard from Acts of the disturbance in Ephesus, stirred up by the silversmiths, Demetrius reminds the Ephesians that Artemis was worshipped throughout the Roman Empire. She was, however, associated particularly with Ephesus – so much so that the statue in Naples museum is labeled 'Artemis of Ephesus'. The great temple of Artemis in Ephesus was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and she herself was in effect the city's patron goddess. Her worship was identified with the city to such an extent that on coins struck to commemorate treaties with other cities, Ephesus was represented by an image of the goddess. She was honoured by regular processions through the city. All this meant, of course, that her cult was the source of the city's wealth. Woe betide anyone who challenged that cult!

And it was to Ephesus that Paul, the great Christian evangelist of the first century AD came, and in Ephesus that he spent two or three years, because the opportunities for preaching there were enormous, though the dangers were real; as he wrote to the Corinthians, 'a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many opponents' (1 Cor. 16:9). It was hardly surprising if Paul came up against opposition, for in proclaiming Jesus, rather than Artemis, he was, as we would say, putting his head into the lion's mouth.

The story told in Acts of the riot caused by his preaching came as the climax of his stay in the city. He had preached the good news of Jesus to the people, and had had the audacity to tell the Ephesians that, as Demetrius puts it, 'gods made with human hands are not gods at all'. Paul's mission had met with considerable success – so much so, that the trade in the silver representations of Artemis on sale outside the temple plummeted, to the fury of the silversmiths. Visiting Ephesus in the first century must, I think, have been something like visiting twenty-first century Lourdes, except that the knick-knacks on sale would have been of a higher quality, made of silver rather than plastic. And now trade was drying up.

Paul's gospel was inevitably regarded as an attack on the goddess, but since it was her worship that attracted the crowds to the city, it would have been seen also as a threat to the livelihood of the inhabitants. The silversmiths' real problem with Paul was that his success was undermining their trade, and so damaging their income, since those whom he converted to 'the Way' would no longer wish to buy shrines devoted to the goddess Artemis. They were able to present the danger, however, as an attack on Artemis herself, and it was this rather than the threat to their own livelihood that gained them public support. As the town clerk remarks, when he tries to subdue the riot, Ephesus was thought to have been entrusted with the task of acting as the guardian of the great image of the goddess. If they defended her, she would defend them. Paul was seen, then, as attacking the welfare of the city's citizens.

Last week we heard about Athena, who was regarded by the Greeks as the embodiment of wisdom. Artemis can be seen as the goddess who was the embodiment of both aggression – the ability to rule the world by force and gain one's desires by imposing one's will upon others – and the wealth which came as the result of plunder; a goddess, then, who symbolized the attitude of those whose only real concern was with themselves, and who were prepared to ride rough-shod over others in order to gain power and riches. And just as the worship of Athena stood, as we saw, in stark contrast to the message of Paul, who preached a God whose wisdom was revealed in the folly of the cross, so the worship of Artemis stood in contrast to Paul's message of a God whose power was seen in the weakness of the cross, and whose riches were revealed, not in silver or gold, but in the poverty of a homeless Galilean preacher. No wonder there was a clash!

So who won? We might well say 'Paul', since the gospel he preached is still proclaimed today, whereas Artemis is no longer worshipped. But is that true? The Temple in Ephesus may have been raised to the ground by the Goths in AD 268, but looking round the world today I wonder whether most of our rulers and leaders are not still worshipping her, as they pursue power and riches. Certainly she seems to be providing a role-model for many who are rampaging today in the Middle East.

But what of my Damascus Road experience in the museum at Naples? Seeing that statue of a goddess dressed with the trophies and images of wild animals, I suddenly understood the meaning of Paul's words when he wrote to the Corinthians describing how he had 'fought with wild beasts at Ephesus'.

How, it has been asked, could Paul have fought with wild beasts? Later in the first century, some Christians were indeed dragged into the Coliseum in Rome, where wild beasts were set loose, to the amusement of the crowds. But

Paul was a Roman citizen; he would never have suffered such a fate. And even if he had, he would certainly not have survived to tell the tale. No, his words must be a metaphor. Imagine Paul, preaching in Ephesus, confronting worshippers of a goddess who was symbolized by wild animals. Imagine him there when the theatre filled with people shouting 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians'. Paul's friends refused to let him enter the theatre, but for two hours he had to listen to the crowd baying for his blood. Confronted by that statue of Artemis, her body clothed with images of wild beasts, I realized the significance of his image. He might well describe his experience in Ephesus as 'fighting with wild beasts'. And if Christians, down the ages, have described themselves as 'fighting the good fight', it is because the cult of Artemis has not been destroyed, and because the forces of aggression and the desire for wealth are still rampant, even though the goddess herself may have long since been forgotten.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Apollo

26th October

This week, we continue our series on Olympian gods, by looking at probably the most Olympian of all Olympians, Apollo. And in order to get to grips with what it means to worship Apollo, it is worth asking the extent to which the Greeks believed in their gods.

It's a tricky subject, because by "the Greeks" we refer to multiple cultures, in multiple places, over the course of a thousand years. And most people nowadays have horrifically caricatured versions both of what belief is and what a god is. But one thing we can be sure of is that the Greeks of Homer's day were not stupid. Of course, they did not believe that if you dare to climb Mount Olympus you could actually go on set and meet the members of Homer's Olympian cast list. Of course they didn't believe you could go and converse with the gods, any more than we believe that if you go to a cobbled street in Manchester, you could share a meat and potato pie with Ena Sharples, Vera Duckworth or Dierdre Barlow.

Of course the gods did not exist in the same way that a mountain exists, or a bag of frozen carrots exists, or the Right Honorable Nicolas Clegg arguably exists. Think of that story about the Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Apparently, a friend visited his house one day and saw that he kept a horse shoe on the front of his house – the symbol that is supposed to bring good luck. And his friend asked him, "Hey, famous physicist Niels Bohr, why would you of all people keep a horseshoe on your house, – surely you don't believe it brings you good luck?" And Niels Bohr replied, "No – of course I don't believe in it, but I have it there because I'm told it works even if you don't believe in it."

That, I think, is how the Greeks engaged with their gods – this is a world of fictional characters who nevertheless represent a set of dynamics that reflect and shape how the world functions. A god simply being the personification of a force that shapes human fate but is beyond human power to control: these gods provide stability, balance, equilibrium, order. And here is where Apollo comes to the fore. For all the multiple attributes of Apollo, principle among them all is his role as both giver and interpreter of law and order.

Surely he's the archer, god of medicine and sickness, the god of colonies, the god of music. But these all come under his role as lawgiver. Not simply law as written statutes, but unwritten rules, customs, social conventions, designed to grease the wheels of Greek society.

In the early pages of the Iliad, Apollo is offended that Agamemnon – the Greek king of kings – is refusing to allow a prisoner to be ransomed, breaking one of the rules of civilized warfare. The wealthy should be able to buy back their family members who've been captured in war. How does Apollo react? By shooting his bow at the Greek forces – but this does not mean that actual arrows literally rain down upon them. It was a plague that tore its way through the Greek ships that was interpreted as his arrow. So when Agamemnon repents, the curse is lifted and the plague departs: that, is the origin of Apollo's role as bringer and healer of sickness!

Apollo is also the god of colonies: it's hard to police a colony, so you need to have a secure set of laws and customs and conventions in place, and these colonies again, and so these colonies worshipped Apollo. Law is how this god achieves colonial order, Apollo's 'spooky action at a distance' – action at distance, of course, being precisely what an archer does.

And then Apollo is the god of music? What does this have to do with law? Again, the instrument of Apollo is the lyre, a kind of ancient near-eastern six stringed guitar. This was seen as a very different instrument to a flute – because a flute plays only a single note at a time, encouraging an individualism at odds with Olympian picture of society. No, Apollo was a defender of harmony, of stringed instruments, with every member of society fulfilling their allotted role, being in accord with one another – symbolised by the six-stringed lyre or the harp he holds in statues. Everything running smoothly.

Apollo was the god of law, and his hourly fee was extortionate, as any visitor to his oracle at Delphi well knew. That famous inscription, know thyself, was inscribed on the stonework of Apollo's temple at Delphi – but at roots of this maxim is not some philosophical virtue of self awareness – to know thyself, is rather to know thy limits, to behave thyself, to stay in line, to obey the law. Other inscriptions at Apollo's temple include such liberating commandments as: nothing to excess, curb thy spirit, observe the limit, fear authority, hate hubris, keep woman under rule, fear authority, bow before the divine. By obeying these rules the cosmic hierarchy remains intact and all is well and good with the world!

But what about those being crushed under weight of this particular cosmic hierarchy? All that Homer will tell us about are the great kings and nobles with divine ancestors – the only exception being the infantryman, Thersites – and when Thersites dares to speak up about the greed and cowardice and stupidity of the pointless war on Troy, Odysseus beats him up and poor Thersites is humiliated in front of the entire army. In fact the show-down between Odysseus and Thersites is like that between Paxman and Russel Brand, only Paxman is armed with a baseball bat. Thersites did not know himself, as a mere commoner, he did not remember his place in the cosmic hierarchy, he got above his station and was guilty of Hubris.

Hubris is defiance against the gods principally because it is defiance against kings and rulers. Apollo will certainly not tolerate this kind of social imbalance amongst his people. Apollo wants everything to run smoothly, and instills the Olympian ideology deep into the heart of his people. This, after all, is what worship is – as people construct their identity around the dominant values of the day. Thank God we are more advanced than our unenlightened ancestors... or are we?

Our bursar here at Robinson refuses to use a phrase that has become commonplace in the employment market: human resources – because so few people see what view of human life is encapsulated in that phrase. Human resources... Only in a society that views humans this way, could we understand human identity primarily in terms of our usefulness to employers.

A recent book by a leading Belgian psychiatrist, argues that this is the world we live in: Our human identity is shaped by our economic usefulness, and in order to learn this – we are happy to believe ourselves free, whilst not noticing the rules with which we comply. "Every time we walk down the street, turn on the television, or open a magazine we are told how to behave and how to attain the perfection expected of us. We all have to jump through evaluation hoops..."

Of course, anyone that does not make the grade is condemned and humiliated, just like Thersites. The example he uses is from his own specialisation of mental disorders. "According to the American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, there has been a spectacular rise in new disorders in each new edition. 180 mental disorders in the second edition, 292 in the third, 365 in the fourth," and the current edition now includes as disorders, all manner of normal human behaviours and emotions. In other words, if you do not build your identity

around the prevailing norms, it is because you have a disorder. Apollo, as the god of order, has no room for disorder – for anything or anyone that questions the cosmic hierarchy.

The New Testament reading today, presents its own cosmic hierarchy – and is usually read as promoting a society in which everyone is fulfilling their allotted role so that everything runs in harmony. But the distinctive thing about Paul's writing here, is that it subverts the hierarchy of the day. This is not simply a division of labour in order to maximise efficient productivity. Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mould, says Paul. And whatever the cosmic hierarchy here – there are no humans more important than any others. No slaves, no nobles, no kings or emperors. Each member of the body, says Paul, belongs to all the others. No one should have an elevated view of themselves, be devoted one another in love, says Paul, honour one another above yourselves. This is a highly distinctive model of society – which, incidentally, blows out of the water this ridiculous but widespread myth that the bible condones slavery. Paul tears it out at root – presenting a radically different, genuinely non-conformist model of society.

Scripture displaces the cosmic hierarchy – albeit with another one – but one that is far more egalitarian. To the Greek mind, Paul, like others of the early church – are willfully, dangerously, and deliberately guilty of hubris! Of not knowing their place in the cosmic hierarchy, of disrupting the cosmic equilibrium, of subverting the proper authorities, of destroying the cosmic harmony. And this is precisely why the early Christians found themselves in trouble so frequently, why they posed such a threat to the great empire of their own day, and why they were so frequently accused of Atheism: they would not honour the gods of their state. Apollo wants law and order and defence of the status quo no matter what. Paul – as we heard last week - is willing to cause disruption and chaos and disorder in pursuit of a genuinely alternative power dynamic to the top down power structures of the Olympians.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Ares

9th November

Throughout this series, I have found it difficult not to use the language of a cosmic hierarchy – where there are things and people who exist to serve us, and there are things and people we serve, and above them, are greater cosmic forces to which we are all subject. Every belief system, from neolithic cave paintings to neoliberal capitalism, brings with it a cosmic hierarchy. The point with this series, is not so much to condemn hierarchies, as to highlight their existence. The Olympians have a clear cosmic hierarchy which helps to highlight those of our own day, as well as the distinctive nature of that found in Christian Scripture.

On Remembrance Day the obvious god to consider is Ares. Ares is a difficult god, because he is both an Olympian – and yet he is despised and hated by the other Olympians, especially his father, Zeus. I suspect, because he is not simply the god of war. Athena, is the god of state-sanctioned war – the god of legitimate violence, the god of civilised, chivalrous, honourable warfare. Ares is the god of insatiable, indiscriminate, vengeful war: unpredictable and unmanageable, a threat to the proper order of war.

The Roman version of Ares, is the god Mars – but it is not a good match. Mars, like Athena, is strategic, tactical, measured warfare. Ares is emotion-driven, and does not follow the rules of war – and that is why he is hated by his father.

The sacrifices of war recognise the cosmic hierarchy of Olympus: foot soldiers are worthless pawns, noblemen count as warriors, and only royalty have a shot at being heroes. If you're a worthless pawn, you die in battle – there is no interest in capturing you. But, the nobility whom the Olympian Pantheon upholds, can be ransomed for treasure. At least if it's civilised war –

But the violence of Ares is egalitarian. It is blind rage, driven by emotion – by grief, by vengeance, by desperation, by the feeling of cosmic justice. In the Iliad, Ares is the fury that drives Achilles to annihilate Hector after the death of Patroklos, and there is no ransom for Hector [at least not, so long as Achilles remains angry].

My only experience of this was in boxing – where, in the final bout of a knock-out competition my during training at Hereford, which up to that point had loosely compliant with the Queensbury Rules. My opponent came out for round 2, to touch gloves – and as I returned the gesture to touch his gloves, he punched me in the face! That felt very unfair, especially since he was my friend, the Marquis of Queensbury turned in his grave, and I recall being pretty angry – but I genuinely have no recollection of what happened next. All I know, is that a few seconds later, Private McIlmont was stood outside the ring refusing to re-enter. Something terrible had happened that felt unfair and wrong – and Ares is the god of blind rage that takes over.

I am in no way suggesting that Ares is virtuous – that the blind rage of violence is justifiable. Instead, I can't help seeing it as a coping mechanism. Ares himself, of course, is not driven by any sense of fairness. In the Trojan War he's caught fighting on both sides – sometimes as himself, sometimes in the blind rage of Hector's onslaught.

When the Spirit of Ares takes over in a battle – it is not good for the nobles, for the kings, for the descendents of the gods who can go usually into war in the knowledge that they can be ransomed, and not necessarily face death. Athena, Mars, these are the gods who will follow this convention – but Ares, quite literally, takes no prisoners.

Perhaps a better example is Shakespeare's Henry V – where the night before the great battle of Agincourt, the king has disguised himself as a peasant and wanders around the English Camp where the mood is grim. And the incognito King assures some of the troops, "the king himself has vowed not to be ransomed."

But one soldier replies, "He said so, but after our throats are cut, he may be ransomed and we none the wiser." So, at the beginning of the battle where the English are outnumbered 5-1, Henry delivers the most celebrated motivational talk in English literature.

And immediately Montjoy, the French herald, comes to beg King Henry to be ransomed, "before thy most assured overthrow." And Kenneth Brannagh, in front of his entire army, burns his bridges – "come thou no more for ransome, gentle herlad, they shall have none I swear but these my joints, which if they have as I shall leave 'em them, shall yield them little." That speech is a sacrifice to Ares – no class distinctions, no social hierarchy, the king has destroyed it all, "He today, that sheds his blood with me, shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile this day shall gentle his condition..."

And sure enough, for Shakespeare, the horror of the battle is that knights and nobles lie dead in the mud alongside the unnamed common footsoldier. This is warfare according to Ares – desperate, indiscriminate, blind rage. He is hated by the other Olympians because he does not respect the cosmic hierarchy.

So there is a difference between the warfare of Ares and that of Athena, between furious, indiscriminate, egalitarian violence, and the more civilised, state-sanctioned, justifiable violence. Some ethicists and psychoanalysts have made similar distinctions between types of violence: between the type that everyone can piously condemn, and the type that is acceptable to us. Between the violence that can be measured with statistics, casualties and criminal records – and the violence that is systemic, that is built into our systems of economics and politics and social relations, and is largely invisible. Between what Slavoj Žižek describes as Objective violence, and subjective violence.

It is best illustrated, according to Simon Critchley, by the story of two men, having had a couple of drinks, who go to the theatre and quickly get bored with the play. One of them feels the need to relieve himself, so he tells his friend to mind his seat while he goes to find a toilet. The man wanders down the corridor, but finds no toilet. Wandering ever further into the recesses of the theatre, he walks through a door and sees a plant pot. After relieving himself into it, he returns to his seat and his friend says to him, 'Ah that's a shame! You missed the best part: Someone just came on the stage and relieved himself into that plant pot'.

This is Žižek's view of violence: "Watching the tedious play on the world stage, we might follow the call of nature somewhere discreet, but we lose sight of the play and the unwitting role we have within it. We are oblivious to the fact that we are urinating on stage for the whole world to see. And that's how violence works: Our subjective outrage at the facts of violence – a suicide bombing, a terrorist attack, the assassination of a seemingly innocent political figure – blinds us to the objective violence of the world, a violence where we are perpetrators and not just innocent bystanders. All we see are apparently inexplicable acts of violence that disturb the supposed peace and normal flow of everyday life. We consistently overlook the objective or what Žižek calls 'systemic' violence that is endemic to our socio-economic order." [Critchley]

I suppose it highlights alternative ways of engaging Remembrance Day. On the one hand, we can try to contain the violent aspects of our world in a frame, up there on stage, safely separate from who I really am. Tell ourselves that we must learn the lessons of the past, that violence is terrible, and piously affirm our pacifist sympathies. Or perhaps, we could recognise that violence is all there is, that human nature is to be violent, and that every generation we are confronted with its horrors, and the challenge to face up to tackling it. We can either distance ourselves from violence, or take responsibility for it. We can join the Olympians and condemn Ares, or we can challenge Olympus itself.

This is largely the point of confession in Christian tradition. It was not, originally a pious way of wiping the moral slate clean before an Obsessive Compulsive Divinity. Nor is it the liturgical gateway of clearing our conscious so we can get on and enjoy the service. This is a courageous speaking out, recognising and affirming our place in the world, including our own little part on the world stage of violence. Violence is not simply the thing up there on stage for us to observe piously – confession is where we accept our role in the drama: if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves. Christian confession is an invitation to inhabit the world with our eyes wide open, without succumbing to guilt ourselves, or throwing guilt at those above us in the hierarchy. Confession takes its place in Christian worship, alongside the meal we now share.

In this meal, the cosmic hierarchy is subverted, as we heard in our reading where Jesus declares himself not the leader – but the servant. The son of man comes not to be served but to serve, the greatest among you all must become the least, the first will be last and the last will be first, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted. That is the community that gathers around this meal. To participate in this meal, is to find our true place on stage in the cosmic drama, and to inhabit a kingdom that will always challenge Olympus.

Dr Judy Weiss

Blaming the gods

16th November

The fifth century before Christ was a tumultuous one for the Greek city-states. It saw triumphs: the defeat of the Persians; the rise of Athens, the inspiring influence of the war-leader Pericles. But it also saw plague, years of war, and some shameful behaviour by the Athenians: the destruction of Melos, the arrogant and doomed attack on Sicily... Finally, disaster: Athens is defeated by Sparta, the city's Walls are pulled down, Socrates is put to death for his views.

In this same fifth century an intellectual elite reflected upon what triumph and disaster might teach us. Some of their writings are still read and still performed. They are the three great tragic playwrights: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Through them we can see traditional beliefs about the powers supposedly governing their world – the gods. And we can also see the dramatists challenging such beliefs and offering new ideas of their own.

Foremost amongst the questions they raise are these. Who or what controls the universe? What are the sources of disaster, both for individuals and the people? Does man have any responsibility for it? Why is there so often a yawning gap between what we deserve and what happens to us? Whom should we blame?

The simple answer often seems to be: blame the gods. But who, and what, are the gods? The answer is complicated by two kinds of god existing in parallel: the older, earth (or chthonic) powers, and the newer Olympian deities. The former seem particularly connected to fear, revenge and pollution; they have names like Erinyes or Fury, daemon, alastor and kir. They can be used by the Olympian gods to enforce rough forms of justice, such as blood feuds.

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides seldom portray or refer to the gods as admirable or attractive figures. They set mortals impossible dilemmas; they tempt, deceive and punish them; indeed, this seems a religion built on punishment. As a Chorus says in one play, if the people cannot see arrogance and injustice punished, they cannot believe, they cannot be pious. On stage or off, these gods are angry, violent, vengeful and jealous, and their punishments are usually out of all proportion to a crime.

If indeed there is a crime in our sense of the word. It is hard to see what Oedipus has done wrong. He has tried to avoid killing his father and marrying his mother; in his ignorance he has done both. Perhaps it is his very attempt to circumvent the oracle that predicted these acts. Or perhaps it is because the very nature of his character leads him to excel, to stand out above his fellow men, and "mountains attract thunderbolts" (a comment in another play, Ag). The gods are jealous of human excellence and of anything that surpasses allotted limits; the very qualities that make men great may be labeled hubris and put them in the firing line. Oedipus blames "some malignant god" (he uses the word daemon here) for what has happened to him.

Better then to keep your head down and show fear and respect? Even that can be difficult. A remote ancestor may have done something wicked. Hereditary guilt can mean that the crime isn't punished till generations later. The house of Atreus is a notorious example in Greek stories. Atreus quarrels with his brother and feeds him, unknowingly, his own children; but the pollution of this deed creates an alastor, an avenging, malicious spirit that lives in the house of Atreus, and affects its descendants. One of these is Agamemnon, whom the gods give the

impossible choice to sacrifice his daughter or let the Greek ships rot, becalmed, and never sail to Troy. Agamemnon lets his daughter be sacrificed, and is then murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, for this deed. In turn their son, Orestes, feels compelled, by the “justice” of the blood feud, to murder his mother, and is pursued by the Furies.

Inheritance can thus sit heavy on a character’s shoulders, and is often used to plead innocence, lack of culpability. Clytemnestra, when confronted by the horrified Chorus, attempts to avoid responsibility and cast the blame elsewhere. It wasn’t really her, she pleads. It was the alastor in the house, created by the original bloody deed, who “appearing in the shape of this man’s wife struck him down”. One of the satisfying things about the Greek tragedies is how they often undermine their characters’ attempts to avoid blame. The Chorus will have none of Clytemnestra’s excuses: maybe an alastor was involved but it was the queen’s hands that indubitably are stained with blood. After the fall of Troy Helen has a set-to with Hecuba, the queen and mother of Paris, about who is to blame. Helen has two arguments: first that Hecuba as Paris’ mother “mothered the beginning of this wickedness”. Second, Aphrodite is to blame for promising Helen to Paris. Blame someone else and blame a god too; none of this is my fault, “I was the bride of force.” Hecuba comes back with all guns blazing. Force? “Did anyone hear you cry for help?” No, it’s sheer lust for a handsome man, and there’s no god involved: “Aphrodite is nothing but human lust”. Finally a desperate Helen begs for mercy from her cuckolded husband Menelaus: “I am not guilty of the mind’ infection which the gods sent”.

Euripides, even more than the other dramatists, raises the question: are the gods real, external forces or are they in the mind, representing our own passions?

If we resist the gods’ will, are we in fact resisting the forces that reside in human nature? When we make a disastrous act we may impute this to their influence, but others (such as the audience of the plays) can see that we do make a choice. When Phaedra falls in love with her stepson Hippolytus, she knows what is right and wrong. Aphrodite may appear at the start of the play telling us how she has influenced Phaedra, but Phaedra herself attempts to follow the course of virtue. She mentions “the madness sent from some God” and her “inherited curse” from her family, but she determines to die rather than confess her love. Finally she lets herself be deceived by her unscrupulous nurse. Hippolytus, meanwhile, is warned against preferring Artemis and chastity to Aphrodite, thus offending the latter, but he chooses to ignore the warning.

The fifth-century dramatists thus constantly play with traditional ideas of divine influence, human responsibility and choice. They remind us that to say “I don’t know what possessed me” or “I am the victim of a predestined Fate” is an inadequate response: we are both victims and agents. Something of their arguments passes down the Christian centuries to philosophers like Boethius (6th century) who is likewise preoccupied with the question of whom to blame, other than himself, as he faces prison. Influenced by neo-Platonic ideas, Boethius learns that there is no stability in human affairs – a world of shadows, only likenesses of the real good. When he debates predestination with Lady Philosophy his conclusion can be summed up in a tag: *Astra inclinant, non necessitant* (the stars do influence us but we are not forced to submit to that influence).

Fast forward eight hundred years: a great English poet, Chaucer, fascinated by the pre-Christian past, decides to write about a pagan story set in Troy. He has already translated Boethius and absorbed his ideas. The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides have for a very long time not been performed, but Chaucer is familiar with Greek legends from other sources, and decides to use the Trojan setting for a Classical tale seen from a medieval re-casting. This is the love affair between a Trojan prince, Troilus, and Criseyde, daughter of a Trojan prophet who deserts to the Greek camp. When Criseyde is forced to join her father, she has to leave her lover and is finally unfaithful to him with a persuasive Greek.

Chaucer's immediate source was Italian and misogynistic: women are fickle and can't be trusted. The English poet was both more sympathetic to his heroine and much more concerned with what made her, and her lover, act. Christian views of pagans, ever since St Augustine, had portrayed them as fatalists, in thrall to useless idols whose power it was impossible to resist. Yet Chaucer's view of his lovers is of good people struggling to do their best in adverse circumstances, dimly aware perhaps of the cosmic bond of love which controls the universe but unable, without the revelation of Christ, to see more. When things go wrong, they blame the gods, and they see themselves as unable to act. Though he and Criseyde are at every point in the poem shown as exercising the freedom to choose, they are unaware of it – and thus unable to break out of their miserable constraints.

Chaucer did not alter what happened to his unhappy lovers, but he supplied a different ending, a coda to his poem that takes it into a new dimension. Turning to his audience, he addresses them, 14th century Christians with the benefit of the Christian revelation. His subject is love. Troilus's love of Criseyde at least enabled him after his death to gain an otherworldly perspective on the mutability of human passion. But Chaucer's audience (and us) is infinitely more fortunate: we know about the real thing. The real representative of love hangs on the cross, redeeming our souls out of love, and incapable of ever betraying us: "For he nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye" (for I assert that he will deceive nobody). Don't blame this God; instead look at the "best," of which earthly love is an unreliable shadow, the truth of Christ, that will not let us down.

Professor Judith Lieu

Hermes the internet god

23rd November

“Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker” (Acts 14.12)

Nearly every one of you could not manage without Hermes. You use Hermes to connect with each other, to submit your essays or your excuses to your supervisor, to find out or tell others about the event they cannot afford to miss. Trust Cambridge to choose for its email system not some neologism like google nor a fashionable appeal like ‘hot’, but the name of a Greek God, and not just any Greek God but the God responsible for communication, for messages from the gods, or in modern jargon from cyberspace.

Hermes was the outcome of one of Zeus’s typical nighttime sexual forays; his mother was the mountain nymph Maia, so he could hardly help but be the go-between between the worlds of the gods and of humans. But perhaps that is also why he is such a two-sided character, as well as being the ultimate multi-tasker. He did not limit his responsibilities to the divine postal service; under his care came travel but also trade. And being unprejudiced, he was equally concerned for the dishonest merchant as he was for the honest one. Indeed he himself excelled in trickery and in theft; while not yet out of nappies – if gods wear nappies which I doubt – he stole the cattle of the god Apollo, herding them backwards and across the sands to confuse pursuers. But such resourcefulness also had its positive side; he also stood for invention and inventiveness. You can thank Hermes for the guitar, or its prototype the lyre, and for competitive athletics, or at least for boxing.

So messenger of the gods, icon of invention, patron of trade and commerce, quick thinking and not above a little chicanery, even a fraudster: you can see why I have called Hermes the internet God. In our world the internet would be his metier; guaranteeing next day delivery of goods ordered from Amazon or Olympia, even if you could never be quite sure whether what you were getting really was the genuine article; oiling the wheels of money exchange and transfer, while perhaps smiling with approval on those who manipulated the foreign exchanges or the labor rate to their own gain. Perhaps not above sending one of those messages from a mysterious source offering miraculous promises of untold wealth, if only you disclose your bank details. Exploiting the creative potential of the internet, for developing, for testing and for selling the latest must-have device. But perhaps at the same time hacking into webcams or infiltrating email accounts in order to exercise the sort of hidden but all-seeing surveillance that is surely the right of the unaccountable gods, whoever and wherever they might be.

When Zeus heard of Hermes’ cattle-rustling he laughed even while he also restored the herd to Apollo. The gods of the Greeks were never meant to be ethical examples to follow. You do not expect Hermes to be morally accountable any more than you can expect the internet to be morally accountable – although that still seems to come as a shock to some people. That is why it is folly to worship both the one and the other, just as it is folly to fear or try to appease one or the other, by whatever sorts of worship and sacrifices. Inventiveness, trade and exchange, communication however carried out, can be forces for good just as they can be forces for destruction; just don’t blame the messenger. That is the point of Paul’s response: he points the people to a God who alone has the ultimate right and the ultimate power to survey everything; a God who is the ultimate creator; a God who is defined by a generosity that is indiscriminate, that is predictable and reliable; a God who provides by direct gift the true goods, or gains, food to eat and joy for the heart. A God who gives without needing to be cajoled by sacrifice or won over by adulation. But when he proclaimed God as creator of all things for all people, a God who had not left herself without witnesses, he was also pointing the way to future Christian commitment to investigating the natural world, to refusing to assign disease or healing to the inexplicable mysteries or unpredictable caprices of the gods.

Hermes would have adapted to the internet because he proved himself adaptable to changing times. By the time that Acts was written the educated elite had already decided that if there was truth in the stories of the gods, as there surely was, - one could no more expel Homer than we could Shakespeare even if some of his history is shakey – clearly that truth did not lie on the surface alone. The tales of the gods demanded interpretation to meet the modern age. Here Hermes came into his own. Any of you who are engaged in interpreting texts are engaged in the art of hermeneutics, and people have long seen a fortuitous link between the Greek verb to interpret, hermeneuo, and Hermes; Hermes is the arch-interpreter – for is not interpretation involved in all communication, whether or not from the gods? Little wonder then that Hermes himself was interpreted as the word when it is expressed, as reason as it is articulated; the very antithesis of the mumbo-jumbo of fable and knee-jerk ritual. When the people of Lystra identified Paul as Hermes because he was the chief spokesman, the author of Acts, quite deliberately I think, used the phrase, ‘the guide of the word’, ‘the leader of the word’, of the logos, very much the designation that the philosophers gave to Hermes. So, would Paul or Hermes best demonstrate a belief in God that could be celebrated by the word, spoken, preached, argued and heard, written, that could be translated and interpreted, re-translated and re-interpreted? A longer sermon would trace how Hermes has continued to fascinate and to invite followers, after the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire, during the Renaissance, during the Victorian period. Perhaps in the age of the internet, when some again see Christianity as caught in ways of thought and belief that belong to the past, Hermes still has a challenge of offer – the challenge of being interpreters, faithful interpreters of the Gospel, for today and tomorrow.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Reflection at Family Communion

My son is a qualified football referee, and his first match as referee was spent overseeing boys three years older than him. But – these were teams comprised of boys with diagnosed disabilities – and my son thought he was in for an easy ride. It turns out their diagnosed learning disability, was anger management – and they were from a rehabilitation unit. He was 13, they were 16 ... and they were angry. How on earth was that going to end?

At Christmas, we celebrate the coming of the Son of God – but this Jesus comes into a world of violence and injustice and empire, as a fragile, vulnerable bag of bones – really, what is he going to be able to do? He's got no influence, no family, no wealth – he's not from Rome or Jerusalem or Chelsea. He's from Nazareth, the Ancient Near Eastern equivalent of Kings Lynn. What difference can this peasant builder from the provinces make to the reality of the world?

We might be forgiven for thinking, none – actually. Because throughout history people have projected their prejudices onto Jesus, assuming him to be on their side, like them, born in their image. This has been nicely exemplified by some southern Baptists I believe, who I believe have put together some stereotypes about people and about Jesus. The sheer political incorrectness of these examples means that only some of them are repeatable:

There are three good arguments that Jesus was a slave from Mississippi:

1. He called everyone "brother",
2. He liked Gospel
3. He couldn't get a fair trial.

Three equally good arguments that Jesus was Jewish:

1. He went into His Fathers business.
2. He lived at home until he was 33.
3. He was sure his Mother was a virgin and his mother thought he was God.

Three equally good arguments that Jesus was Italian:

1. He talked with his hands.
2. He had wine with every meal.
3. He used olive oil.

Three equally good arguments that Jesus was a Californian:

1. He never cut his hair.
2. He walked around barefoot all the time.
3. He started a new religion.

Three proofs that Jesus was a woman:

1. He fed a crowd at a moment's notice when there was no food.
2. He kept trying to get a message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it
3. And even when he was dead, He had to get up because there was more work to do.

Of course, Christian and atheist alike cannot help but project their prejudices, their assumptions and worldview and mindset upon this figure. But the point of worshipping this Jesus, is that he might actually reshape how we encounter him.

Despite his sheer vulnerability, his monstrous fragility, this child born in Bethlehem might just have the capacity to answer back. The challenge of Christmas is to give him a chance - and it's not much to ask. Listening, open-mindedness, curiosity, after all, are foundational rules for our culture.

Those angry teenagers on the football pitch - despite being rough - accepted the foundational rules of the game and conducted themselves well. They might say to us, "Go thou, and do likewise".