

Olympian Gods II

Lent Term, 2015

18th January, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Demeter

25th January, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Hephaestus

1st February, Dr Colin Fairweather, Dionysus

8th February, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Sacrifice

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Demeter

18th January 2015

This term we continue from last term, our theme of Olympian deities, and at the beginning of Lent term we kick off with Demeter. The Meter part of her name, comes from the Greek word for mother, and the de part, nobody really knows. She is one of the older Olympians, most of whom were the sky gods of the invading peoples who swept through the lands we now know as Greece. But Demeter is one of the fewer, older gods not of the sky but of the land, or the underworld. In particular, she is a fertility goddess, responsible for the growth of crops. When the Romans pitch up several centuries later, they adopt Demeter into their Pantheon, giving her the name Ceres, from where we get our word, Cereal.

But there is a tragic story associated with Demeter, one that tries to account for the miserable time of year between Christmas and Easter. Demeter had a daughter called Persephone, and we have to picture her as a young Maiden in the loving embrace of her mother in a television advert for fabric softener. And when she gets a little older, she wanders off from her mother, through the fresh summer meadows and into her teens, playing with her fragrant hair and wondering why she ever used a separate shampoo and conditioner. And Hades suddenly springs up from the underworld like a subterranean Peter Stringfellow, grabs this poor 14 year old and drags her off to his underground club somewhere east of Soho. – Now, before we get on the hotline to the Daily Mail to report Hades as a Paedophile, it probably is worth remembering that we've just been celebrating Christmas, when Mary the mother of God gave birth to Jesus at around 14 years of age. It was commonplace, in these cultures, for these girls in their early teens to be married off to middle aged men – and it's no wonder that the Mother, de-Meter, is left moping and grieving and sulking.

Except that when Demeter mopes and grieves and sulks, it has disastrous consequences: the ground stops yielding crops, there are no breakfast cereals, and therefore as someone pointed out to me yesterday, no cheerios – everything is miserable. Now in the cosmic order of the universe, this is clearly an unacceptable state of affairs, requiring Zeus to intervene. The human race is dying off – and Zeus must stop it. Not, we might add, because Zeus is a great father, but because he rather likes the sacrifices offered to him by mortals, and if there are not crops and no animals and no mortals, there are no sacrifices, and these gods need their sacrifices – so it's in his best interest to intervene. He does this by drawing up a contract, where for a few months a year Persephone stays with her mother Demeter somewhere in the Cotswolds, and for the remainder of the year, she stays at Hades seedy underground lair, in Stringfellows. And that is why, for several months a year, the crops don't grow.

So Demeter is the mother, but what kind of mother is this? One that cares little about the starvation of humanity, so long as her own family is alright, looking after her peers with no care for lowlier beings. And what kind of father is this? One that only cares about humanity because he needs their worship. Still, at least there is no pretence that these are caring and loving deities – and for this reason many people today find Olympian theology more realistic than anything that emerged from ecclesiastical nincompoopery that was Western Christendom with all its pretence of a loving Father who also happens to be an omnipotent supernaturally judgemental mind-reading cosmic manifestation of judge-jeffries. Surely, the Greek picture of gods is more true to life...

Well, take the huge assault on Western Democracy that we are apparently witnessing at present. I don't mean the heightened terror alert state that requires every uk citizen to exchange their pyjamas for bullet proof body armour. I refer to a threat which, according the left wing press marks the end of democracy and according to the right wing

press, is nothing for mere mortals to worry our little heads about. Yes, I'm talking about the headline-grabbing TTIP – the transatlantic trade and investment partnership which will be debated in parliament on Wednesday.

Some say, it's just a trade deal to remove red tape between EU and US trade – others say that red tape are health regulations, safety regulations, financial regulations that have been set up to defend mere mortals from giant businesses and that will effect us at the deepest level. If you've not heard of it, says one journalist, it's because you're not meant to – its not reported to us, and when it is, the language is incomprehensible. According to one leading political philosopher, it is 'post democracy in its purest form', where we don't get to vote on it because it's a deal done by political elites and corporate lawyers, in kangaroo courts with no public scrutiny and no right of appeal.

Bizarre though it may seem, if this alarmist portrait we are given is true, it is a perfect example of Demeter in action. Mere mortals are of no consequence, in her attempt to care for her own kind. The cosmic hierarchy of Olympus is once again, perfectly expressed. In the interests of the powerful entities growing in their global omnipotence, the interests of mortal humans can be sacrificed, ignored – it's inconsequential. The results foretold by political philosophers are that everything required for basic human sustenance is seriously threatened: our health service will finally disappear, our food rapidly degenerates into factory food, our jobs rapidly given over to those in nations with fewer worker-rights, our governments helpless to do anything about it. If this were the Game of Thrones – we would say, Winter is coming. Why? Because Demeter is sulking, its all doom and gloom for human beings lose their basic rights.

Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, is described by Homer, as one who brings into effect the curses laid upon human beings. How can Demeter be placated through losing Persephone? What happens if a democratic government decides it people should not be cursed? Under Ttip, if a government decides to protect its own citizens, it can be sued by a corporation to compensate for its lack of profit. It's already happened in Ecuador, where their government were sued billions of dollars by a US oil company. The oil company had not stuck to the terms of the contract, not abided by ecaudorian law, so the government closed their concession down, and that government was sued 2.3 billion dollars.

That's the Olympian worldview – life is hard, and the gods and elites care little for you. And if the left wing press are right, this does seem to be how the world works. Does the bible offer any kind of alternative? As we enter the doom and gloom of Lent term, the short days and dark evenings and miserable weather... how does scripture deal with this dark plight of human experience?

Well, Lent – even in its name – comes from the number 40, and traces the story of Jesus backwards forty days from Easter Sunday. At the centre of the Christian life and the Christian year, is the resurrection of the Son of God. But during Lent, that is, from Ash Wednesday onwards, Christians have traditionally used the miserable season to try to identify themselves with Christ as he approached his own torture and death. That's why on Ash Wednesday, many will have their forehead sprinkled with Ash. It's why people give things up for Lent, a practice which has its roots in fasting. It's why the liturgy police insists that throughout Lent we don't utter upbeat words like Gloria or Allelujah. It is a dark and gloomy period – which Christians embrace as such.

The point, however, is that throughout scripture Israel as a whole, and Jesus in particular, endures a path marked by suffering and vindication – ultimately, death and resurrection. That is the point of the reading from Isaiah, not written as a preview of Jesus, but as the fate of Israel that Jesus came to embody. And most significantly, when Jesus endures this path as Son of God, he does so not simply as a divine being. The only people of consequence in archaic Greek literature, are the offspring of the gods. In Jesus' own day, the phrase Son of God, had multiple levels of meaning. It meant you were a king, Caesar himself was the Son of God – as was written on the coins Jews carried around in their pockets. A Son of God was a holy person, or one annointed by God. But in Jesus' day, one thing that

the Son of God did not and absolutely did not mean, is that Jesus was the second person of the Trinity. Son of God is a title Jesus never used of himself, although it was constantly used of him. And in Jesus this title is radically redefined.

If, for the Greeks, a son of God was part of the elite ruling class, for Jesus – every human being was descended from Adam who himself was a Son of God. That is part of the point of the genealogy from Luke's gospel – that the Son of God is not simply Israel as a whole, or individual Jews, or emperors or kings or saints. No – everyone descended from Adam, every human being is a Son of God. Every human being is created in the image of God. Every human being is therefore invested with divine dignity. Every human being including sinners, prostitutes and outcasts, including Sadducees and Scribes and Pharisees, including Peasants and Emperors and pagans and lepers. Jesus, as pictured by the Gospels, is the human being in all history most worthy of the title Son of God, and yet in radical solidarity with all humanity, he prefers the title Son of Man. He enters into humanity's dark experience of privation and suffering and despair. As one theologian put it (albeit in a patriarchal pre-feminist context), the Son of God became the Son of man in order that sons of men might become sons of God.

Which is more true to life? The presence of an almighty and all-loving God incarnate in the lowliest human being? Or the Olympian picture of a divine mother and favourites up there and the rest of us down here? In this light, the Gospels can simply be read as an invitation to follow this Jesus through Lent so you can find out for yourself.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Hephaestus

25th January, 2015

Driving my children to school this week, I was interrogated by my second son who has been reading Sophie's World. And he asked me, "Dad – is there like a name for a philosophy where if you don't see things, they don't exist? Because, like, there are fields I will never see – and they might not really be there until I like see them. So is there a philosophy where nothing exists unless you like know about it?" My fifteen year old cut in quickly – "Yeh," he said with his thumb in his mouth, "the philosophy where there's like nothing outside your little world is called Fox News." I suppose, the Olympian Ideology I've tried to portray last term and this term, is pretty much how Fox news would sound if it were magically translated into an Archaic Hellenistic setting. We might like to think that Homer is slightly more poetic, and slightly less shouty than Sean Hannity – but the ideologies they represent are remarkably similar. Hephaestus is a key component of this ideology where nothing exists outside my little world.

Hephaestus is the Leonard Hoffstadter of Olympus. He is the techno-wizard. He was born defective, thrown away by his mother – which was standard practice at the time. He was then saved by Thetis, a non Olympian sea-god who also happens to be the mother of Achilles. Saving defective babies was not standard practice at the time, and only became standard practice with the advent of Christianity – but that is another story.

Hephaestus did not tick the boxes of Olympian gods – he was not beautiful, he was ugly. He was not a perfect physical specimen – Fox news might have described him as a Dweeb, a Geek, a Nerd, or a Cambridge Undergraduate. But worship of Hephaestus took place across the Hellenistic world at a time when the Bronze Age was giving way to the iron age – that is – in a time where life or death depended upon having the most up to date technology. As the new era of technology was born – then those with technological know-how were much higher up the food chain than the muscle-bound grunt monkeys of a previous epoch. Hephaestus becomes a supernatural weapon-smith, and with his technological know-how is accepted by Olympians because they want his weapons, his help, his technology. Once again, Achilles, the thrower of cosmic tantrums, wining whenever he can't have divine help and has to face another mortal in a fair fight – Achilles, has somehow become the archetypal warrior. And yet, in the Iliad he has all kinds of divine help in his battles, and towards the end Hephaestus intervened to save his life twice. And he is the one, of course, who provides Achilles with the best armour any mortal has ever worn.

So there he is: Hephaestus, the god of technology. From the Trident Missiles we need in order to combat terrorists from council estates, through the roar of the Typhoon fighter, to the illuminated apple on the back of your lap top – obsession with technology is worship of Hephaestus. Of course, at this point, it's very tempting to go on a Christian rant about the evils of technology.

You could begin, I suppose, complaining about cheeky teenagers who need to be surgically removed from their smartphones. And you could cite the reports and studies that frequently warn us that human beings are evolving into technological beings. That smartphones have now become an extension not simply of the human body, but of the human psyche. If you're left without your iphone, you feel naked, insecure, incomplete, unable to function. And of course, it is not only teenagers. What has google done to knowledge, in an age where – so long as you're not sitting in the Senior Common Room – you can end any dispute by producing your iphone and consulting google? Of course we complain about what technology is doing to knowledge. And we can laugh at those who camp outside an Apple Store the night before they release a new version of their phone, so that they can be among the first tens of thousands to possess a phone which is destined to be obsolete before its battery gives out. At a deeper level, yes,

we can lament the pitiable state of those who feel they have to have the latest gadget for fear of being left behind, out-of-date, obsolete themselves.

So – the standard ethical, holier-than-thou approach might be to remind people that technology is simply a tool, and we have to take it intelligently in hand. Or we could spout some high-sounded shallow-minded guff about having to educate people. Or maybe some kind of abstinence from technology. But none of this really gets to grips with the challenges presented by technology. The most incisive assessment of what technology does to human being comes from a German Philosopher writing in the 1950s.

Martin Heidegger, described technology not as bunch of stuff in our hand. And he did not suggest that we should oppose it like Luddites. Nor did he say we should fear it, as though artificial intelligence will soon be developed and the world will be ruled by food blenders, washing machines and electric toothbrushes. No – Heidegger thought the dangers of technology went much deeper. If contemporary studies are telling us that human beings are evolving to the point where technologies are becoming like new, add-on prosthetic limbs, Heidegger warned that with technology humans beings are devolving: that we become a tool in the hand of our technology; that we become a high-tech extension of our machines, that we become a flesh-and-blood app for the iphone; that we start to understand ourselves, and feel ourselves and believe ourselves to be pieces of technology. Or, as the bursar laments, we might become Human resources – a living, breathing battery. That our technology shapes us rather than us shaping our technology: to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. We see the world, and ourselves, and our lives through the lens of the technology that dominates us.

Of course, we would never consciously describe ourselves that way, says Heidegger. But the point of the technological mindset is that human beings come to see themselves as being a cog in a wheel, a disposable unit of human labour, an item with a purpose, a thing. This is certainly how lower mortals are cast in Homer. People are valued by the extent to which they serve the purpose of their masters. But – the craftsmanship of Hephaestus, the elaborate shield and greaves and breastplate, all intricately designed, all telling stories of their own, all things to be admired, adored, loved. And if I were a preacher – I would want to say that the God of Scripture created us to love people and use stuff; and Hephaestus entreats us to use people and love stuff. And if I were a preacher, I would want to ask which picture of humanity sounds more authentic, and which picture of humanity is more dominant in our world today.

The technological mindset, keeps the worshippers of the technology obsessed with the next product, on a treadmill, carrot and stick, whirlygig existence. Even if we want to withdraw, it's virtually impossible. Even if you want to rest or relax – how do we do it? Listening to our headphones, or some speakers, or watching the same screen that we use for working on! Resting is now called, Chilling, Vegging, or Down time. But we're still plugged in – Hephaestus must keep us concerned with the immediate, the close-at-hand, hurrying through life without ever stopping to realise why we came into it.

And the biblical alternative to all this, is called Sabbath. Sabbath is not simply closing shops on a Sunday – it is from the Hebrew verb to stop. As in the psalm, it says, Cease Striving, Stop Faffing – and know that I am God. And in the letter to Hebrews – it is a daily activity. To celebrate Sabbath, is not simply to have a rest at the end of a busy week. Adam's first day on planet earth was a Sabbath, not his last day – but the first, when he gets his bearings in relation to God, to others and to the world. As we approach easter – we are told that Jesus died and rose again on the third day. That means, two nights. That means Jesus was only dead for one full day – and what was that Day? It was the Sabbath - in Christian terms, that Sabbath is the epicentre of human history, the day of radical reorientation.

And to celebrate Sabbath brings us very close to a means of Salvation from Technology that Heidegger recommends. That is, Sabbath is when we experience some form of otherness- to meditate on some form of Other. To give ourselves to some form of other, in order that we might receive ourselves back differently. Of course, we are all children of our time, we all have a worldview, we all treasure ideologies, we all inhabit myths – and there is no escape from that. We are all tuned into a particular channel that tells us what the world is. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth, tells us that Sabbath celebration alerts us to the reality of our worldview, and our assumptions, and our mindset, and our ideologies – not so that we ditch them necessarily, but so that we see what they are.

And Heidegger simply says that the moment we become attuned, that is, the moment we become aware that there are other frequencies, other ways of being, other worldviews, that is where we find hope. The realisation that there might be an alternative to Fox News, that there might be a story where there is a world beyond our knowledge and experience, and that we might find a place in that other story. Sabbath is the doorway to another worldview, a doorway that Hephaestus has done his best to conceal, to lock and to bar.

Dionysus

1st February, 2015

1 Samuel 19:18-24

Ephesians 5:8-21

Everything about Dionysus says 'energy'

Sometimes it's a creative energy – Dionysus was god of the theatre, and the earliest Greek plays we have were originally performed at festivals in his honour

Sometimes it's a natural energy – Dionysus is god of the grape harvest, the god of wine, and also the god of fertility

Or it may be a frenzied, dangerous energy, and this is what I'd like to focus on this evening – in ancient Greece and later in Rome, there was a cult of Dionysus which, as far as we can tell, involved participants gathering in the woods at night time and throwing off the constraints of civilised behaviour – we're not entirely sure what went on, but by all accounts there were no holds barred – ritualised wine-drinking, singing, dancing, howling and screaming, nakedness, orgies – you name it, it was one wild party.

What was being offered at these occasions was an experience of ecstasy. 'Ecstasy' comes from the Greek 'ex stasis', and it literally means standing outside of oneself. If you participated in the cult of Dionysus, you could get really out of it – out of it in the sense of having copious amounts of alcohol, but also out of it in the sense of stepping outside the normal boundaries of social existence, and tapping into the raw and primordial energy of being alive.

It seems that the cult was particularly attractive to the people who were most limited by their societies. It was popular with women and with slaves, neither of whom got much of a look-in in the patriarchal ancient world. The cult of Dionysus offered a collective experience – you did it together; it was also egalitarian – everyone tapped into the same fundamental impulses, and the normal social distinctions didn't apply.

The best known story about the cult of Dionysus is a fictional one, but it demonstrates both the appeal and the dangers of this god. In *The Bacchae*, a play by the Greek playwright Euripides, Pentheus, king of Thebes, is disgusted by the Dionysiac revelry that's going on and wants to close it down. The move to suppress it, however, only makes it worse, and so you get these rampaging hordes of frenzied women ripping animals to shreds with their bare hands, tearing up villages, marauding and pillaging. Pentheus goes to spy on the women in disguise, but they end up tearing him to pieces after his identity is blown by Dionysus himself. Pentheus' mother even gets hold of her son's severed head, and she's so discombobulated that she thinks it's the head of a mountain lion.

One of the messages of Euripides' play is that we all possess this animalistic energy, and the very worst thing you can do is to try and suppress it completely, because then you turn it from something containable to something highly destructive. Indeed, before it all gets out of hand, there's actually something rather seductive about the Dionysiac cult – it's joyous, life-affirming, exuberant – all the things the prim, buttoned-up Pentheus isn't.

So, that's ecstasy in an ancient Greek context. Of course, ecstasy has lots of other contexts, and one of them is that of the Old Testament. Here, it's most commonly associated with bands or schools or prophets. In our Old Testament passage tonight, we read of a group of prophets who go into an ecstatic trance when the spirit of God comes upon them. The future king David has taken refuge with them, and when Saul sends his messengers to have David arrested, they all end up in ecstatic trances themselves. Eventually, Saul tries to arrest David himself, but ends up in the just same state.

This is a subversive little story about the power of ecstasy to overcome the institutional power of the world. Imagine a series of porters going to J8 to close down a party that's been going on too long, and instead of kicking everyone

out, they end up singing and dancing themselves when they see how irresistible that partying spirit is. That's the closest analogy I can think of in a Robinson context.

What power there is in collective energy! The power of the ecstatic prophets is the power of togetherness, just as it is in the cult of Dionysus, or at any really good party. We know from other passages in 1 Samuel, that the ecstatic state of the prophets could be accompanied by music and dancing – again, something that reminds us of the exuberant festivity of the Dionysiac spirit.

There is, however, a difference. For the Old Testament prophets, the frenzy is brought on not by wine or intoxicants, but by an onrush of the Spirit of God. The impetus here is not to destroy, but to absorb the power of an opponent. The messengers who go to arrest David aren't ripped limb from limb, like poor old Pentheus is – rather, they're so overcome by the spirit of ecstasy that they end up joining the party – and this is how Saul is defeated.

Of course, what God is doing in the 1 Samuel passage is protecting David His anointed – but it really says something, I think, about the contagious power of God's Spirit – it catches like fire, and there's no resisting its energy. It's a little premonition of how the Holy Spirit acts in the New Testament – in the book of Acts, for example, we see the Spirit's power spreading like wildfire throughout the known world. You can't lock it up, you can't oppose it, the Spirit is on the march, and the best piece of advice would be to just go with its energy.

If we turn to Paul's talk about the Spirit, we can see that some of these themes emerge again. Again there's this emphasis on shared experience – Paul says we must 'speak to one another', and indeed, it's the power of the Holy Spirit to unite and bind together. Theologically speaking, the Holy Spirit is the bond of love uniting God the Father and God the Son – it's the bond of love connecting God to humanity – and it's also the bond uniting us as brothers and sisters in community. You remember the grace that we say at the end of the service every Tuesday? 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.' The Holy Spirit is the power of fellowship – of togetherness – and that's why it doesn't make any sense to say, 'Oh, I don't belong to a church, I just have my own private spiritual experiences.' How you can experience the full power of the Holy Spirit if you don't know His power to draw you into something bigger than yourself? It makes about as much sense as having a one-person choir – or indeed a one-person college fellowship. It's no fun being on high table by yourself – togetherness is everything – and that's where the harmony of the Spirit is felt.

Paul mentions music – again, there's a superficial similarity with the cult of Dionysus. Paul doesn't imagine anyone singing psalms or hymns by themselves – music-making is an expression of the collective identity of the people of God. And indeed, God Himself participates in that collective experience – He's there witnessing it, and perhaps even revealing His glory through it.

The Holy Spirit is often described in the Bible as something liquid. There are several references to the Holy Spirit being poured out onto people. There's a suggestion of that here too – being filled with the Holy Spirit is like being an empty vessel which the Holy Spirit is pouring Himself into.

So, does the liquid metaphor again put us in mind of Dionysus and his wine-drinking? Is what's being offered in Paul a kind of holy intoxication? I don't think it is. Paul says 'Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.' In other words, what happens when you'd had too much wine, and what happens when you're filled with the Holy Spirit are two very different things. People sometimes half-remember this passage and think Paul is talking figuratively about being drunk in the Spirit – that's not the case, despite the superficial similarities – so I'd like to end by thinking about what the Holy Spirit offers that Dionysus doesn't.

Well, the Holy Spirit is the energy of God, and for this reason, it's genuinely empowering. In the first book of Acts, just before Pentecost, Jesus says to his disciples, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.' Throughout scripture, we see the Holy Spirit conferring on people the power to do things they wouldn't otherwise be capable of – prophesying, healing, performing miracles, and preaching too – speaking words of astonishing truth and power, as both Peter and Paul do.

Now, you may feel a sense of empowerment when you've had one too many, but chances are that sense of empowerment is delusional. The danger of Dionysiac experience is that, in stepping out of the normal realm of things, you're aligned not with a higher divine power, but with a lower, animalistic one. Look at the devotees of Dionysus in Euripides' play who hunt down and kill Pentheus like they're a pack of animals. Of course, human beings

are animals, with all kinds of animal instincts, but what the Holy Spirit reveals to us is that we are more than this, and are capable of going beyond our limits when God allows us to do so.

The second major difference is that Dionysus can ultimately offer us only a world of darkness. And I don't just mean moral or spiritual darkness – though again, to reference Euripides, if you kill your own son and then wave his severed head about, no one's going to particularly take you for a model of virtue. But there's other kind of darkness – that of the mysterious and unknown. Ultimately, we don't really know what the devotees of Dionysus got up in their ecstatic rites. We've got a fictionalised account in Euripides, and we've got some descriptions from the enemies of the cult, but first hand accounts, as far as we know, don't exist. After all, the Dionysiac rites took place at night, in dark woods, far from prying eyes – it wasn't a civic religion, it was a cult, that is, an organisation performing secret rituals that were known only to initiates. Dionysus offers entrance into a dark concealed world, and from the outside, we can only peer in with a combination of fascination and fear.

Paul in the Ephesians passage writes that 'it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done in secret.' These things he describes as 'the unfruitful works of darkness' – and they might very well include the dark goings-on of the Dionysus cult.

The Holy Spirit, in contrast, brings us out from the darkness and into the light. And by 'light', I mean not just moral or spiritual purity, but a realm of openness and knowledge. The Holy Spirit, Paul says, brings understanding in what the will of the Lord is. Unlike Dionysus, who is a self-concealing god, the Christian God has revealed Himself, through His Son and through His Spirit, to the whole world. We can see this, again, in the book of Acts, where knowledge of the good news spreads, through the power of the Spirit, from Jerusalem, and then outwards to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. We also see it in one of the Anglican creeds, which asks, 'Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who makes Christ known in the world.' The news that Christ has conquered the power of darkness is such good news that nobody should be prevented from hearing about it. Dionysus might offer a feeling of liberation to initiates who sneak off into the woods to perform their dark deeds; but what the Christian God is offering is liberation for the entire world, and a message of forgiveness and redemption that's addressed to everyone.

What incredible openness and generosity there is here – and how mean-spirited and defensively self-protecting even the most abandoned Dionysiac orgy looks in comparison!

It leaves me with some final questions. Where are the false freedoms in our own lives, that appear to offer us something new and exciting, but in fact only plunge us further into a world of darkness? And how can we best embrace that irresistible Spirit of communal life and open sharing that connects us to each other, and makes us feel whole in a way that nothing else can? We're all capable of acting in spirited ways – but how can we tap into the Spirit that comprehends us all? If we can find an answer to that question, then genuine ecstasy may be within our grasp.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Sacrifice

8th February, 2015

'After several hours' tracking a stag through the wilderness, his footprints tell you that he has begun to tire. Your kinsmen have separated him from his herd, leaving you, the runner, only one set of marks to track. He will outrun you over a short distance, but you are built for endurance and he is not. He can only flee, hide and rest but you cannot afford to give him rest because precious lives depend upon the final chase now before you. Your pace quickens as the land rises and hardens. You make little sound as you weave your way through the trees, keeping the weight of your body in the lift of your arms and off the fall of your feet, but now his tracks have vanished. The stag has been your companion for hours, connected to you by the bonds of the lengthy, exhausting hunt. He is no stranger. You spirit yourself into the mind of your prey. You know the rhythm of his movements and, feeling his instincts, you anticipate the path he must have taken and you push on. A sound in the woodland ahead confirms your gamble so closing in, and nearing the point of your own exhaustion you break into a sprint. He comes into full view and bolts but all his energy is spent. After a few scrambled strides he stumbles, his legs buckle and the beast collapses, chin flat on the dry earth panting and helpless. Hours of relentless pursuit have reduced him to the mortal fatigue from which no animal can recover. Those huge brown eyes which for hours have sought out the paths you have been forced to follow, are now fixed upon you. As your spear sinks deep into his heart, a small pool of dark blood spreads silently across the dry earth.

If we could perhaps access our genetic memory and feel for ourselves the monstrous vulnerability of life, the radical insecurity of our hold on it, the bloody costs of our own survival we might begin to appreciate what is taking place in the hunt.

At the moment of death, something happens between hunter and prey, an event he experiences as an engagement with otherness. The stag's death somehow gives him a glimpse of his own, exposing him to his own fragile mortality. This event draws the attention to something beyond the parties involved in the hunt, to some greater economy within which he is reminded of his proper place. The prey has been his partner in this deadly game, a game which on many occasions he has lost. But today his death brings life to those he loves. Having slaughtered the beast he is left alone in the wilderness with a terrible gratitude that must be expressed. But how? And to whom? The ritual following such a kill is no less instinctive than the pursuit itself.

Long before humans learned to forge iron, loose arrows or even hurl javelins, this form of 'persistence hunting' ensured the survival of our species from one generation to another. From the earliest rituals surrounding the slaughter of an animal, clearly the nature of the event has evolved in multiple directions. In every case, a combination of factors have no doubt shaped the way in which this great otherness has been described: Deities of tribal, global, and cosmic nature have all been named, with varying degrees of personal interest and involvement in the lives of mortals. The rituals then, that develop around the deliberate killing of an animal, seem to be the origins of what we call religion – and they confirm the worshippers place in their local and their cosmic hierarchy.

In fact, the Christian practice of saying 'grace' (a prayer of thanksgiving) before a meal has its origins in ancient hunting rites. Of course, it's a long way from our ancestors who knew both how to hunt and how to be hungry, to the overfed 20th century western family pausing to splutter, 'rub-a-dub-dub, thank God for the grub' before burying their teeth into factory-produced meat. More recently, as the Christendom ideology has given way to the Secular, the departure of the grace from the dinner table distances us still further from our ancestors. This is by no means because we are now somehow enlightened, more aware of what our world is and how it works. After all, according

to Philip Limbery's book, *Farmageddon*, 'more than a third of young adults in Britain don't know that bacon comes from a pig, milk from a cow or eggs from a hen.'

In many ways our supposedly superstitious and unenlightened ancestors understood the world far better than we. Tucking into shrink-wrapped processed meat, at a safe and sanitized distance from the animals killed for our sake, with at best only a theoretical awareness of what happened prior to its arrival at the back doors of the supermarket, might it be that our grasp of our place in the universe is somewhat blinkered? It is precisely this grasp at our place within the cosmic order that sacrificial rituals are designed to affirm. That is why *mal time grace*, in any setting, is usually said by the senior person at table – you notice that even at Robison, it is not the priest who says grace, nor should it be: and not only because – as our bursar points out – Robison is probably the only college whose chaplain does not know any Latin. No, grace at a meal is spoken by the senior member of the family or institution – it reflects the proper structure by which we order our families and our institutions.

In the secular modern west, whether we like it or not, we are the cultural descendents of Abrahamic religion – and at the root of Abrahamic religion lies this incident of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Although trendier theologians now like to describe this kind of event as an act of divine child abuse, it is worth remembering that Isaac was about 30 years old when his ancient father placed him on the altar of sacrifice. But then what happened? God's voice told him to kill his own son, and then God's voice told him not to... and Abraham is commended for his willingness to kill his own son! What is that all about?

It's worth remembering, that this is not just any son. Isaac is the one through whom God has already promised to bless Abraham's innumerable descendents. By killing one man Isaac, Abraham knew he would be committing genocide – destroying the entire Jewish nation. While God commends Abraham for his willingness, the real point of this passage is that – unlike the gods of other nations – this is not one who demands human sacrifice. If you know your Greek poetry, you know that even the great King of Kings, Agamemnon, is forced by his own promise to the gods to sacrifice his own daughter – and there was no divine intervention to prevent that. And it's easy for us to miss how distinctive the Abrahamic religion is here, when we stand in the cultural, ethical mainstream of tradition that flows from this narrative. Had the Olympian worldview remained dominant and shaped our culture at the deepest level, would we value human life in precisely the way we do? Of course we would not – although we can only guess at what our worldview would be if the wars of history had had different winners.

The very criticisms that westerners often level at Abrahamic religion, arise from critical, ethical, frameworks that are unwittingly inherited from Abrahamic religion in the first place. So take the ancient Greek and Roman practice of throwing away your baby if it defective or female or unwanted. Jews, for instance, had a questionable morality in Roman eyes because they refused to get rid of unwanted babies but valued every human life. And early Christians were criticised because they rescued unwanted babies from rubbish tips as part of their religious commitment to the God of Abraham. So these supposedly intellectual questions like, 'is the catholic church a force for good and evil in the world?' make little sense, when our very conceptions of good and evil are so radically and unwittingly shaped by the effects that catholic religion has had on our culture. We simply cannot measure the extent to which our own value system is dependent upon the value of Abrahamic religion.

What we do know is that when divine intervention prevents Abraham from killing Isaac, the usual cosmic order is disrupted. This is not a god who requires human sacrifice... Or is it? The Gospel reading has Jesus describing himself as a ransom for many. But too easily we read this as some mechanical spiritual transaction where a supernaturally abusive father is about to destroy his rebellious and independently minded offspring simply because they are human, so Jesus gives his own life to assuage god's anger. But that is a mis reading. The context in Mark, has Jesus – to some extent – as a representative of Israel, who in this context are the 'many'. The Son of Man gives his life – not

to gain victory of the 'many' but to liberate the 'many'. The cosmic hierarchy here, is not Jesus presiding over the many, the one whose power is affirmed at the sacrifice – Instead, Jesus himself offers a radically alternative cosmic order: his way of being a leader, is giving oneself entirely to those he would lead, a king who subjects himself to his subjects, a Messiah whose path to greatness gives himself to suffering and failure and defeat. And for whom greatness, and divinity, and cosmic hierarchy look entirely different by the time they are re-read through him. And in this light, I close by reading again those words from Mark's gospel which show that the sacrifice of which he speaks undermines the cosmic hierarchies with which we might be familiar.