

“God Is Not Angry”

I should say straightaway that I have borrowed the title “God is not Angry” from a book written by the late Benedictine priest, Father Ian Petit.¹ In his introduction, Fr Petit writes:

To learn about a God of rules and regulations is to acquire a very distorted picture of God. After all, the way we think about God will determine the way we relate to him. A God who requires our good behaviour will be a God who can instil fear, and this will either make us observant or despairing. I am afraid that many of us grew up with the idea of a demanding God, and once the wrong picture of God is acquired and is lived with for a long time, it takes a very great amount of effort to remove it.

Perhaps it depended, first of all, on whether we attended a Catholic school as a child, and then, secondly, on who our teachers were (whether lay or religious) as to the image we had of God as we grew up. Thinking back, it seems to me that God came across as being just like our teachers only more so, in the sense that we knew the rules and regulations and God seemed to be just “sitting there” (wherever God sits!) waiting for us to transgress those rules, to do something wrong, and as a result we could expect to be punished. The catechism became a guidebook to all the many pitfalls that awaited the erring Catholic along his or her daily journey, with God hiding behind trees or around corners along the way, just waiting to catch us out. Talk about a distortion of how things really were (and are). Of course it probably didn’t help that we were taught that we should fear God but without anyone making the distinction between our normal understanding of the word fear as in “being afraid” and the sense in which the Church uses it as in “having reverence and awe” (for God).

What started me on this train of thought was a recent television documentary about our Iron Age ancestors. One of the experts, talking about Iron Age ritual and religion and discussing the rather strange contents of pits that had been unearthed, suggested that they were probably offerings that had been made to appease the gods of the earth. The people of the time, he said, were constantly looking over their shoulder to see if the gods “were going to get them”. It crossed my mind that sometimes in our own day and age we are not so very different in our perception of our God, constantly trying to appease him and, as we see it, keep him from being angry with us?

How on earth did we come up with this sort of image of God? It can only have come from our teachers and, sadly, from our priests. We would have been almost a third of the way through the old “penny catechism” before the subject

¹ *God Is Not Angry - The Truth That Sets Us Free*, published by Darton, Longman, Todd (1997)

of sin came up and yet it seemed to jump the queue considerably in terms of the priority it was given. We were bound to sin and were only too aware of all the ways in which it was bound to happen, and God was out to get us the minute it did! We became at least as concerned with not doing wrong as with doing right. Where was the God of compassion and love? Sadly some have yet to meet him and God remains the overseer in the sky – not overseeing as a father might his child, but as a teacher might his pupil or a boss his employer, a constant effort at appeasement and keeping on his right side or else.

Fr Petit again:

Fear of God can produce conformity or it can make individuals obsessed with their sins and failures. This fills them with anxiety and worry. Every time they come into the presence of God, there is an uneasiness, even an unwillingness to approach him... They imagine his penetrating eyes piercing into them and they are in mortal fear of what he may do to them... Such an attitude clearly shows that it is not the message of salvation in Christ that has penetrated but rather the message of condemnation. All this springs from basic misconceptions picked up in childhood and never corrected. God is not an ogre nor is he a benign uncle in the skies. He is a God of mercy. Fear of damnation can convert a person, but to live by this fear is to have failed to meet the God of mercy.

Sin is a reality in our lives though, of course, it wasn't meant to be that way. That was why God sent his Son to redeem us, to buy us back, to put things right and make possible once again the opportunity for salvation. That's not the plan of a God who is out to get us, if it was he would have left us in our fallen state; we would have saved him the trouble. Ours is a God who knows and loves us and wants us to know and love him. Through his Son he has adopted us as his sons and daughters. He has saved us from our human condition and not only offers us heaven but also the means of getting there: his grace, his word in scripture, and the sacramental ministry of the Church he founded. As we know from Our Lord's own teaching in the gospels, if we fall he will pick us up and if we stray he will go out looking for us, searching until he finds us and carrying us home. That's not a God who is looking for our every mistake; it's a God who knows what we are like and will overlook our transgressions provided - and this is the important part - that we are sorry and willing to learn from our mistakes.

It's exactly what Fr Petit said above, God is not an ogre *but* neither is he a benign uncle. The pendulum of post-Vatican II theology (and religious education in our schools) has perhaps swung too far in the direction of a God who loves us, with the implication that it doesn't matter what we do because he will always forgive us; that's how much he loves us. I think we probably need

to work through that statement in reverse, in that he does indeed love us so much that he is always ready and willing to forgive, but that doesn't give us carte blanche to do whatever we like, or to live however we want, presuming that we can always say we're sorry. That's what young children often do – they say they are sorry and then go off and do the same thing again and have to say sorry again. How sorry are we if we never learn from, and correct, our mistakes? We can't keep turning to God and saying that we are sorry for our sins unless we are prepared, with the help of his grace, to correct our faults and avoid the occasions and situations that we know have led to sin in the past or which could lead us to sin. Otherwise what does saying we are sorry mean? What can God expect as our response to his forgiving love? – certainly not that we just go off and do the same thing(s) again regardless of the hurt we cause him.

We can't, therefore, expect God to be a “benign uncle”, always smiling, never unhappy with us, always overlooking our offences. He is actually much more than that: he is our loving Father, who doesn't always like us (or at least the things we do) but who does always love us and is always ready to forgive us provided we try to make ourselves worthy of his love and forgiveness. And so sometimes, as we see in the Old Testament in particular, he *is* an angry God, but it is anger provoked by a “stiff necked people” (Ex 34 v 9) who were constantly unfaithful to their covenant relationship with him no matter what he did for them. Clearly, even God found that exasperating at times because his chosen people just never learned.

People in the Old Testament also seemed to have a very negative image of God, somehow always expecting his anger and punishment, needing to appease him to keep on his good side, a God to be “bribed” and cajoled. The God of the New Testament, revealed in and through the person of Jesus Christ, is a God who loves. He loves no less than in the Old of course, but in a sense we have so much more going for us as New Testament people. Through Jesus we know God more intimately and in Christ God knows what it's like being one of us, and how much and what ways we need his help and grace. He's not out to trip us up, looking for our every mistake – he never was. Christ died to redeem us and God wants to make that redemption affective in our lives, otherwise what was the point? But it requires a positive response on our part; we have to believe that we are redeemed, we have to become New Testament people, and that means letting go of our childhood fear of an angry God in order to entrust ourselves instead to the God who loves us and has saved us.

Cistercian monk Michael Casey writes:

The fundamental fact is that it doesn't much matter whether our failings and fallings are many or few. Our confidence and our peace stem from our being convinced that God's love for us is unconditional. This is not to say that our sins do not matter. (But) God can use our sense of their

*seriousness to demonstrate that even the offences we most regret are no more than specks of dust on the scales of mercy.*²

Just repeat that phrase: no more than specks on the scales of mercy... yet some of us are still convinced that God beats us over the head with those scales, or at least that's the image we project onto God. Spend some time in front of the cross and see if you can still say that.

Let me just repeat what Fr Petit said:

The way we think about God will determine the way we relate to him... (but) once the wrong picture of God is acquired and is lived with for a long time, it takes a very great amount of effort to remove it.

If ours is still the image of an angry God, a God who is watching our every move, ready to smite us at every turn, how can we change it? It won't be easy because, as Fr Petit suggests, over time it has become ingrained, but the effort is well worth it because the benefits could be eternal. The message of the gospels is quite clear, that God would much prefer to forgive (if we are sorry) than to punish, but if we continue to hold on to our childhood, Old Testament, image of him, it may be preventing us from enjoying a much more positive and helpful relationship with the God who loves us.

So where to start? Well how about a couple of passages from St Luke's gospel in which Jesus tells us about his Father: Lk 15 v 4-7 and Lk 15 v 11-32. We might also consider: Gal 4 v 1-7, Eph 1 v 3-14, and 1Jn 4 v 7-18. What St John says in the last verse of that passage actually takes us full circle to what we started out by saying: *In love there can be no fear, but fear is driven out by perfect love: because to fear is to expect punishment, and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love.* If we fear God it's because we expect punishment all the time, failing to accept that God loves us and isn't in fact constantly looking for reasons to reproach us. We therefore don't need to keep looking for ways to appease God in order to keep from being punished, we do that by avoiding sin in the first place, by right living - living as God wants - and by loving and serving him.

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² from his book *Strangers in the City*, Paraclete Press (2005)