

Chapter Eight

Is Jesus the answer to the silence of God?

“Truly you are a God who hides himself, the God of Israel, savior.” Thus said the prophet Isaiah (45:15), somewhere late in the Babylonian Exile. He expected great things from God, but he knew God was “holy,” set apart, and hidden, though he had seen –or perhaps, precisely because he had seen– the “Holy One of Israel” sitting high on his throne, with only the fringes of his garment reaching down to the earthly temple down below (Isaiah 6:1). Solomon had already declared (the short poem is considered authentic) that “Yahweh intends to dwell in dense darkness” (First Book of Kings 8:12). This is a fact –that God cannot be seen– that we have to live with. Yet Isaiah rounded out the loftiness of the God of Israel he had experienced with the belief that God also dwelt with those who are crushed and whose spirits are downcast, to revive them. It sometimes seems that it is we who lift up God, who defend Him from charges that he is aloof, in order to buttress our faltering faith in Him.

Even Jesus cried out on the cross “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” God can seem to be terribly silent amidst great suffering. Think of the Holocaust, think of wars and the camps of the refugees who are innocent victims, and of the children. Think of horrible crimes of rape and murder, most especially when a little child is involved. All of this can make the world seem very much like the jungle, or the African Maasai Mara, where it is perfectly normal that lions and leopards and cheetahs prey on, chase, claw and devour Thomson’s gazelles, zebras, wildebeests and hares. It is just the order of creation, and if anything, God has ordained it that way, and has no reason to interfere. One could argue it is humans who dream of a “return to paradise” where there will be no killing, where all are vegetarians, even lions, as prophesied in Isaiah 11:6-9, when the “messiah” comes. It might be like waiting for Godot.

Jesus did suffer, and we say it was “for us,” but many others have suffered and continue to suffer, too, often more than Jesus.¹ Many in the world are “suffering servants,” too, but

¹ The First Letter of Peter 2:21-25 says that “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you follow his steps. He committed no sin, and in his mouth was found no deceit [from Isaiah 53:9]; when he was reviled he did not revile in return, when he suffered he did not threaten, but commended himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body [from Isaiah 53:12] on the wood, that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed [from Isaiah 53:5]. For you had strayed like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and keeper of your souls.”

Christians focus on Jesus, as the Letter to the Hebrews exhorts them to do, since most have not yet suffered to the point of shedding blood (Hebrews 12:1-4). It seems that the ball is almost always on our court: it is up to us to keep the faith alive, to pray, so that the hidden God can be less hidden. At times like this, it seems that it is we, again, who prop up God, who seem to be doing all the heavy lifting. And yet the faith continues, and flourishes, especially in extreme cases where a very tried person radiates joy because of the closeness to God he or she feels in her plight. These are the times when the hiddenness of God takes on a different sense: God seems then to be truly there, though hiding, in the lowly and afflicted and crushed.

Prayer indeed helps, and can even change everything, at times. I avoid here the easy platitudes and the simplistic views that if we only believe and persevere everything will be alright. That is indeed the very dynamic of faith: once doubt sets in, and questions, they become like static for our sense of God, noises in our communication with Him. But in this inquiry, we have to question, in the belief and hope that airing things will lead to more light and, ultimately, a better, even stronger, faith.

We choose to believe, to go on, to keep hoping in God, and things do change, and we attribute this to God's hidden hand, mysteriously guiding and providing. But how is true joy to come, a real energy and enthusiasm (which means 'being filled with God')? Certainly the starving are even physically incapable of "enthusiasm," as we envision it. No, God if anything is at best really hidden in many cases, and this issue, and the questions it raises, are not to be waved away with platitudes, which can be blasphemous, obscene, in many situations, especially if we humans do little about them.

Is God's silence, his hiddenness, always the right medicine for every patient? Faith says that it is, that God never tries us beyond our strength. Eleanor Roosevelt said that we can always do more than we think, and this may be true; it is at least a good exhortation, it spurs us on with a call to perseverance and fortitude. But there are medicines which can kill the patient. What can faith say about this? If suffering is medicine, can there be too great a dose? Faith says not, and it is in the dynamic of faith to believe this and to explain the "medicine" we are receiving as being given in the perfect dose, since we are never tried beyond our strength. And if it does kill us, then faith says it was meant to be; we are all going to die sometime anyway. Perhaps that terrible suffering or mishap was our last trial on earth.

We seek hope and look for (or imagine) patterns which explain things and comfort us (“comfort” also in the sense of “strengthen”). Certain individuals, their stories, inspire us. Franklin Roosevelt was a pampered only child; his mother doted on him. At age 39, he was stricken with polio. It was a crushing blow, and his faith faltered for a time (he was an Episcopalian). But he found great strength to come back, to literally get back on his feet. His mother had taught him that he could do anything he put his mind to; he also had the example of his fifth cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, who had overcome childhood ailments which had rendered him a weakling, becoming a superman, physically able to do amazing feats, unafraid of anything. He once got hit in the chest by a bullet and still kept giving a speech for another hour, after having simply verified that his lung had not been penetrated. Franklin was in a unique position to overcome his great trial: his background and the examples he had empowered him to do so, although ultimately, we are all alone in our suffering and trial, and must pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, even if we count on “divine help.” But do all enjoy this kind of preparation, are the trials of some harder even than Roosevelt’s?

It is said that without the polio, Franklin would never have gone on to become perhaps the greatest president the United States has ever had. Polio had flattened him (literally), and it took all possible mental and physical efforts to get going again. But he was a changed man. The spoiled, snobbish aristocrat became compassionate to the less advantaged, and the man who had overcome a sort of physical death became an unmovable, unshakable mountain of calm and confidence, able to be a great leader to a nation in severe economic (and spiritual) depression, and later faced with a terrible menace and war. It is said that without polio, he would never have had a chance even to do this, since in all likelihood he would have run for president too soon, in 1924, and been defeated, in a decade dominated by the opposing party, the Republicans, and his political career may have well been over, at least nationally. But things happened otherwise, and no one could have dreamt that his life would turn out as it did, not when he was, at 39, stricken with “infantile paralysis.”

Faith of one sort or another is the warp and woof of the human search for meaning in the world and inspiration for one’s life. Franklin Roosevelt, with his massive head which seemed like a living, flesh and blood version of his cousin’s on Mount Rushmore, inspired great confidence because he had overcome, he had gotten back on his feet after a terrible personal tragedy. His fate and calling were obvious: he was to lead a large and great nation in the most

difficult of times, in a grand real life struggle, the Second World War. Strangely, he was a man described as “devious” even by those who loved him, and he had relationships with women other than his wife who deeply hurt the latter. And the basis, if you will, of his great strength and courage, the sign of the trial which had made him what he became, his limpid, useless legs, had to be hidden from the public. The reality of Roosevelt’s inspiring presence had to be masked by myth, the myth that he was able-bodied, “normal,” not crippled. And of course his personal foibles were quite hidden from view and from any public conversation. He was like God, in the eyes of many, as polls showed.

Humans seek and then latch onto whatever helps them go on. They create myths, in the sense of inspiring stories, which somehow point to deep truths, or at least great realities, such as Roosevelt’s overcoming polio, which made him think he could do anything, or perhaps more to the point, made others believe he in him as the one who could do what was needed in desperate circumstances. And it is true that personal strength is conveyed to others who are thus inspired by it.

Humans seek out these things, these stories and the persons about whom they are told. It is humanity’s way of coping with the fears that the overactive brain creates. Notice the situation with Roosevelt: he was first the product of an aristocratic upbringing, where many things way beyond what physical survival requires were given to him, spoiling him in many ways (he was not popular in high school or college, seen as too aloof, too refined). He thus became ambitious, and started making his way into politics. And then he is struck with polio, and it seems everything is over, but he finds the strength, slowly but surely, to redo his life, and go on. And then at the “right moment,” he wins the presidency and is called to lead the nation in deep economic depression.

“Economic depression”: this is a situation of suffering and *anomie* (feeling lost, dejected, without direction or purpose) caused by the “overactive brain,” who, not content with a cave or with just hunting or gathering, or a nice house and shelter, seeks riches, speculates, is greedy, reckless, and after building prosperity and comfort, destroys it all overnight. Economic depression is wholly man-made, a monument to the bad decisions humans make with their brains, a monument to “survival of the fittest” in the economic realm, which jeopardizes the lives of all, though mostly of those who are poorer and more helpless. And it takes presidential saviors to save the nation in those times, and it seems they arise when needed, or at least did back then.

And then there was the leadership in the world war. Evolution brought prosperity and greed, and nations made conquests and borders became disputed and there was a first world war. There again human decisions created conditions which were unstable, and Hitler arose, as a false savior, imbuing his people with a sense of mission and greatness which was insane as well as inane. And just a few years after a horrible man-made war, after which attempts had been made to implement the lesson learned and to prevent war from ever breaking out again, the world was at it once more, our complex world, where the balance between minding your own business and having to intervene is very difficult to achieve and to understand. We learn by dint of observation, less often by experience, especially where there is no precedent for understanding what is taking place.

And so arise great leaders like Roosevelt and Churchill, with their spotted lives, and amidst tragedy inspire, so that people are actually happy when the tragedy ends, forgetting there was one, or moving on to the next thing, which always has inherent difficulties and shoals and *escollos*, dangers to be avoided like Scylla and Charybdis, and life's struggles continue. And for the believer, God is always there, in the background, watching, but close enough through prayer. But often what is most palpable is the *mazo dando* (our swooshing with the scythe), rather than the divine presence represented by the *a Dios rogando* of the Spanish saying: *a Dios rogando y con el mazo dando*, "keep on with the work of the scythe while continuing to pray to God."

Perhaps our feeling of the weakness and pathetic condition of humanity is made to make us compassionate, but we can wonder, Are we more compassionate than God? It seems that it is we who are down here doing the dirty work, suffering and encountering every difficulty and obstacle, while at most God is comfortably listening to our prayers until the "right time" comes for him to act. This is a question we can ask, or a feeling we want a response to, and it is a valid one. This is why some have posited themselves as "devil's advocates," or actually, as advocates for humanity against a deity uncaring at best, an alienating drug at worst. And then the believer, the faith, raises its head again and points to the possibility, the less angry approach, the greater peace of resignation. And the journey continues.

Does Jesus answer our question regarding God's abandonment? This is the best argument the believer can make; the Buddhist's answer does not depend on faith or on belief in God. The story of Jesus, the "myth," in the sense of a story which explains or sets forth a great mystery, is the most that can be had, or constructed, regarding the mystery of how God can allow suffering

in the world and still care most deeply about humans. It says that God entered the world as a fellow human to suffer for us, and in this way to “redeem” us. Let me try to unpack this.

The story of Jesus assumes that God will not radically alter the composition of the world himself, except in a “spiritual” way, until the “end of time,” when there will indeed be a “new world,” when the “new creation” inaugurated by Jesus will fully emerge. Most “orthodox” accounts include the belief that creation, originally good and even perfect, was damaged by the first sin, and paradise was lost. Even the coming of Jesus did not alter this; it only brought the possibility of living in the created world as it is with new eyes, and with a new purpose, and in a new way. The hope for a “new world” already expressed in the book of the prophet Isaiah after the Babylonian Exile (Isaiah 65:17) is “recycled” in the Book of Revelation 21:1, when the seer says that he saw “a new heaven and a new earth” because the old ones have disappeared, and the sea, the unruly realm of chaos and evil, is no more. And God will finally dwell amidst humankind.

In the background to this are many biblical passages which poetically and prophetically express the hope that the coming of the messiah, or of God, to the earth will utterly renew it: images of the hills distilling wine, or wheat fields shining with abundance, and grapes being so plentiful that one can wash his clothes in wine (!), are to be found throughout the Hebrew Bible, expressing the idea that goodness and justice will cause changes to happen in the world.² The other side of the coin is what evil does, cause the earth “to mourn” and wither with everything in it, and the fish of the sea to disappear (Hosea 4:1-3).

Clearly, at first glance, what we indubitably have here is in the first place exhortative passages, promising changes in the world if humans act and become righteous. The Jews speak of *tikkun 'olam*, repairing the world. We have a long way to go, but it can also be looked at on the personal or perhaps small community level: one sees things differently if one does what is right and good, leaving behind destructive behaviors and lifting oneself out of depression and *anomie*. And many small communities, “utopias” (meaning, of course, “non-places,” places which don’t exist) exist, more or less, where a simple lifestyle is lived in harmony and study and other activities and attitudes which promote a feeling of peace and well-being. Perfect

² See, e.g., Genesis 49:10-12, and Amos 9:13, which is recycled in Joel 4:18; compare the miracle of the water turned into wine at the wedding in Cana, John 2:1-10. The end times are depicted as a return to paradise, where there is no violence: Isaiah 2:1-5 (parallel in Micah 4:1-3; swords are turned into plowshares), and Isaiah 11:1-9, already mentioned, with its ‘vegetarian lion’. The great messianic Psalm 72 presents a picture of justice finally being done on the earth and the earth flourishing with abundant wheat and fruits and flowers (verse 16).

functioning of these is more of an ideal; even the first Christian community, described as sharing everything and as having one soul (Acts of the Apostles 2:44-47; 4:32), is considered to have been depicted in an idealized manner; there were some who didn't share everything, or were dishonest, and were cursed and dropped dead (Acts 5:1-12).

It is well known that the biblical depictions of the “messianic age of salvation” include a “really” renewed earth and an end to war, and specially an end to the oppression of Israel. Many passages speak of Israel as dominating others in the end, as giving their enemies (or God giving them) their comeuppance; see, e.g., Isaiah 60. Others speak more neutrally about an end to warfare and weapons, though Zion's humble king, riding on a pure-bred jackass, will rule from sea to sea (Zechariah 9:9-10), finally establishing global peace.³ Other passages predict friendship and communication among former enemies *par excellence*: Isaiah 19:16-25 speaks of a roadway from Egypt to Assyria, and a new triumvirate of friends, seemingly equals, all under God's aegis: Egypt, Assyrian and Israel. Jews, when they consider these passages, take them for the most part as literal renditions of what final redemption will be like; Christians view them “spiritually” or metaphorically, postponing their realization until the *second* coming of Christ, although in the Christian view, the desirability of the physical world actually remaining is often problematic, and played down if not ignored.⁴ The focus is on the “afterlife,” in “heaven,” where there is no marriage (Gospel of Mark 12:25), although there will be wine-drinking (Luke 22:18) and a banquet with various kinds of seating arrangements (Mark 10:35-40; Matthew 8:11-12).⁵

So many of the biblical promises regarding “redemption” or “salvation” (which we can briefly define as the final victory of right over wrong, when all things will be made right by God, which is what *shalom* means) have to be considered as metaphorical or at least only fulfilled in the “end time.” The End Time can be considered as collective (the righteous finally redeemed and vindicated and living in a new earth) or as individual, that is, the individual person, when he

³ It is most likely that the meaning of the double-description of the donkey in Genesis 49:11 and its recycling in Zechariah 9:9 (“misunderstood,” perhaps on purpose, in Matthew 21:1-7; Matthew at times makes “intentional mistakes” for a deeper purpose, as in 29:9), is “pure-bred jackass,” a male ass born of two donkeys (a jack and a jenny), and thus fertile. It was the mount of deities (as in Ugarit) and kings.

⁴ I once gave a lecture to a group of elderly Jews and a lady asked me, “Where in the Bible does it say that the Messiah has to come twice?” I told her that in her Bible it didn't, but that in the Christian Bible it does.

⁵ It must be noted that there is often a fine line in knowing, when discussing certain gospel passages, if it is appropriate to speak of “heaven” as opposed to the more Jewish view of a renewed but seemingly very real earth. The passage in Mark 12:25 has to do with the resurrection of the dead in the end, and Jesus is quoted as saying that “they will be like the angels in heaven.”

or she dies, will be judged and rewarded or punished. This individual view is probably more Christian than Jewish, although in Christianity there is said to be a collective resurrection (the “Final Judgment”), but what it may add to the blessed state of the righteous when they die and meet God, or to the punishment of the wicked, is not clear. In the Book of Daniel, where the only clear reference in the Jewish Bible to a physical resurrection is to be found, the resurrection is collective (it is for the “many”) and includes apparently (or arguably) only the very good and the very wicked, for reward and punishment respectively; apparently the morally mediocre simply are left out, and don’t rise (Daniel 12:2).

So this is a good part of the background to Jesus’ ministry. He was a first-century-of-the-common-era Jew who had a most unusual experience of God. He considered himself to be in close relation to God, whom he saw as his very own father, and experienced what he perceived to be the renewed activity of God in dramatic ways. The late scholar Hartmut Stegemann thought that Jesus, who healed women with blood flows and “cleansed lepers,” understood this as the final eruption of God in the world, after a long dormancy period. This was tantamount to a new creation, or at least a return to the paradisiacal state before the “Fall,” before sin came into the world and brought sin and evil. At least incipiently. With this conviction, Jesus went about preaching that the “kingdom of God” had drawn near, that is, the time when everything would be submitted to God’s rule, restoring the conditions of God’s original intention when he created the world.⁶

With this conviction, and his reputation as a healer and “miracle-worker,” Jesus began “playing the role” of the messiah, only in his own peculiar way. Rather than stressing how God would bash in the heads of Israel’s enemies, as in Psalm 68:22 and Amos 9:1, Jesus spoke of God as an extraordinarily loving father, who ran out oblivious of his patriarchal dignity to meet his “prodigal son” and welcome him back, without needing to hear the repentant son’s rehearsed apology (Luke 15:11-32). God was like a vineyard owner who gave all his workers –whom he went out to seek at all hours of the day– their daily wage, regardless of how long or hard they had worked. God was a crazy sower who scattered his valuable seed all over the place, knowing it would not grow everywhere, but seemingly giving everyone a chance.

⁶ See Stegemann’s provocative book *The Library of Qumran. On the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus* (English translation; Grand Rapids – Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Leiden – New York – Köln: Brill Academic Publishers, 1998), especially chapter 9, “Jesus.”

The messiah was God's representative on earth, a king, too, or in Ezekiel's view (adopted by much of Judaism), a "prince" (*nasi*), since only God was King. The image of the king in the ancient Near East was that of the shepherd, and Ezekiel 34 depicts God, and "his servant David" (the Messiah), as seeking out the lost and wounded and unprotected and cast out sheep to make them return to him and heal them, and make them lie down to eat. This seems to be exactly what Jesus did in his meals with outcasts, where he actually reclines with his guests (he seems to be the host) and speaks of himself as their physician (Mark 2:15-17).

There is hardly a more loving view of God acted out, and many people followed Jesus, who was even said to have fed a multitude with a few loaves. There was little spectacular in all this, or at least, nothing portentous is presented, for the most part (the Gospel of John does have "portentous" events, such as the raising of Lazarus after being dead several days –the other gospels narrate the raising of the very recently dead, sometimes even thought to be "asleep;" a whole cohort of soldiers falls to the ground at Jesus' word; we already mentioned the water turned into wine). Some healings take place by grades (the blind man in Mark 8:22-25), or with very earthy (literally!) methods (the blind man in John 9:6-7). The Gospel of Mark even says that Jesus could perform no miracle in his hometown, because they did not believe (Mark 6:5-6).

So we have a very human Jesus, which is not surprising. He is to his followers the face of the invisible God, "God with us," "Immanuel." Later theological reflection will articulate this faith in Jesus: he is the very image of God (Colossians 1:15), his "character" (the "stamp" reproducing an exact copy, Hebrews 1:3), God's own Son sent in the end, whom God did not spare.⁷

In the Christian narrative, God does not immediately eradicate suffering and evil. Jesus told a parable about how God waits for the "final harvest," when the good and the bad shall be separated, also described with the metaphor of a large fish net which contains all kinds of fish which are left mixed and mingled until the end of the world (Matthew 13:36-50). The kingdom has "drawn near," but is entered into only with struggle, perhaps even violence (Matthew 11:12; Luke 16:16). Much remains to be done, and the way to the kingdom is narrow and difficult

⁷ See Hebrews 1:1-2, but already an authentic parable of Jesus, found in Mark 12:1-9 and in the Gospel of Thomas *Logion* 65, speaks of a son sent in the end, or after the other emissaries. "God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten son," John 3:16; Paul says that God "did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all," in order to give us "everything in him," Romans 8:32. In the background is the "sacrifice of Abraham" or "of Isaac," in Genesis 22, where Abraham is asked by God to offer up his beloved only son as a holocaust.

(Matthew 7:13-14). Paul, or his disciple, speaks of the need to complete the sufferings still required in the “body of Christ,” Colossians 1:24.

It is a sober picture. Jesus himself had no illusions: he could easily imagine his fate, death, just as his mentor John had been killed; it was the traditional fate of the prophets. Jesus had set his mind to die in Jerusalem, for that was where a prophet like himself should die (Luke 13:33). Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus in the end did not disavow being the Messiah; in fact, he sanctioned the belief, demonstrated by his entry into Jerusalem just before the Passover, an incandescent time when political liberation was commemorated and yearned for. He entered on Zechariah’s pure-bred jackass, a humble but also a royal mount. The well-known penalty for this kind of political crime was crucifixion, and Jesus by all accounts embraced this fate.

So if we are to believe that Jesus was God’s beloved “only Son,” his painful fate was certainly a sign of God’s love and care; God could intervene no other way in this world. The why remains a mystery, but in the Christian narrative, God’s “aloofness” is thus addressed. If human life is hard, if there is injustice and innocent suffering, these cannot be removed, at least not right now, but these evils can be shared, and that is what Christianity believes the hidden God did in Jesus.

Jesus himself faced this fact. He is reported to have repeatedly prayed in Gethsemane: “Father (using the Aramaic *Abba*, the child’s address to his own father), everything is possible for you; take away this cup (the suffering on the horizon) from me, but it’s not what I want, but what you.” It is an attitude of faith and submission not belied by the following events, and the attitude and behavior of Jesus as recorded. Jesus the human being recoiled at suffering, he was afraid and anguished, and extremely sad (Mark 14:33). The version in the Letter to the Hebrews has him ‘kicking and screaming’ (Hebrews 5:7-8). Christians see in him the perfect man, a true human being who did what was right in his mind and was consistent with his faith, no matter what the cost. Being obedient to God was, is, more important than any other consideration, no matter what it costs. It is a declaration of ultimate value: God’s will is more important than our life and all its cares and projects.

The question can arise as to what exactly is “God’s will.” It is at least what our conscience tells us, but in Christianity, and especially in Catholicism, this works only if our conscience is “informed.” This means that we have struggled to discern what is right, to look at the large picture beyond our narrow interests, which we should view with a healthy dose of

suspicion. To think in the long term and not in terms of more immediate satisfaction. In other words, to make decisions based on the utmost good faith, and being truthful with ourselves.

The example of Jesus is striking, in that he was convinced his mission was to suffer. Perhaps it is better to proceed with care here. Jesus clearly saw his mission as defending humanity, helping them, and this entailed confronting the powers that be, then and now keeping humanity more enslaved than free. This confrontation could only lead to death, and a very specific one in the Roman empire. So far, there is little here requiring talk of ‘God wanting Jesus to suffer and die’, but in reality, especially that of Jesus in his day and place, nothing happened without God’s involvement and permission and will (Matthew 10:28-31 RSV):

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Jesus could have been inconsistent with his mission, which enacted what the messiah was expected to do, which included: the in-gathering of Israel, as he saw it (seeking out the “lost sheep”); confronting evil-doers; declaring the “final eruption” of God in the world; entering Jerusalem as Messiah. He could have disavowed it all in the end, when faced with its dire consequences. He did not. It is said that he could easily have escaped the jurisdiction of the governing authority; he certainly is not reported to have sought to escape, or to get out of the jam by defending himself. He did hide at night until it was time (see, e.g., Luke 21:37; John 18:1-2; Acts 1:16; Judas knew his hiding place). But in the end, he was a man of one piece, without doubts once he realized that there was no eschewing his fate.

The story could end there; Jesus was an exemplary man, true to himself and his God, perhaps a noble ideal for other, like-minded or so-disposed idealists and dreamers. But the Christian narrative continues, with the accounts of the “resurrection,” which almost complete the story. The story will only be complete when Jesus returns. It seems that we are destined to die in expectation, like Jesus did.

The story of Jesus is that of a man who died young (he was anywhere from 33 to 37 when he died) in the most ignoble manner, naked and crucified on a cross, reviled and mocked as

a failed messianic pretender.⁸ His followers fled when he was arrested; he died alone, except for some women who had followed him from Galilee and watched from a distance. The hopes of his disciples were dashed. The story of two of them as they walked to Emmaus rings true: they had expected Jesus to redeem Israel, but he was instead executed by the Roman colonial power.⁹

Jesus' disciples started "seeing" him "risen from the dead." The resurrection of the dead was an expectation in Judaism, prophesied by Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2-3 (discussed above).¹⁰ It was expected to take place at the "end of days" (see Daniel 12:13). But Jesus' disciples began announcing that he had "jumped the gun," and had already risen. Some gospel accounts go to great lengths to depict the physical reality of the risen Jesus: he eats with them, and can be touched.¹¹ Other accounts point out that he appeared in a "different form," and that some had their doubts.¹² Perhaps the most dramatic witness was Saul of Tarsus, "Saint Paul," who some years after the death of Jesus was convinced he had seen him, and was changed into a new person, an intrepid missionary and spreader of the "Gospel," the "Good News" (already a term for the end of the Babylonian Exile in Isaiah) of the story of Jesus.¹³ Paul gives the earliest "official" list of those who saw the risen Jesus in First Corinthians 15:1-8, including himself in last place.

These accounts do not constitute proof that Jesus rose from the dead. More interesting in this regard is the apparent fact that there was never a cult surrounding Jesus' burial place. It may be that it was not known, but it could also be that the tomb was empty. What we are left with, if we take the hard-nosed view we have adopted here, is the faith, intrepid as it may be, of Jesus' disciples, which we can either choose to share or eschew. The story, however, has its pull: the hidden God mysteriously does not, perhaps even cannot, eliminate evil and suffering in this world for the time being, given the nature of creation and the autonomy which it apparently has been granted, or at least, enjoys. Perhaps God, through prayer, can be pressed upon to do something, to change things, as even Jesus tried to do in the garden. But things do not go our

⁸ The dates given by scholars for Jesus' birth (during the reign of King Herod the Great) range from 7 to 4 B.C.E. He died during the prefecture of Pontius Pilate either 29 or 30 C.E.

⁹ Luke 24:13-21.

¹⁰ The Second Book of Maccabees, a Jewish work of the second century B.C.E., in chapter seven, also expresses belief in the resurrection for the righteous (verse 9), but not for the wicked (verse 14).

¹¹ Luke 24:39-43.

¹² See Mark 16:12; Matthew 28:16-17.

¹³ See Isaiah 40:9; 52:7; 61:1. A good summary of what scholars call the "kerygma," the preaching of the early Church regarding Jesus, can be found in Acts of the Apostles 2:22-36.

way, and terrible tragedies occur, are “allowed” to occur, by God. But then there is a turnaround, the great *peripeteia*, the long-desired reversal of fortune in the Greek tragedies, and the end of the story is ever more poignant and effective precisely *because* of the bottom hit in its seeming first ending.

The story of Jesus is thus there as the Christian answer to our plight: we live in a world of suffering which we should try to make better, even at the cost of our lives: there is no greater love, Jesus said, than to give your life for “your friends.” This generosity was what most struck Paul, who understood Jesus’ sacrifice as pure altruism (Romans 5:6-8). Jesus for Christians is the example of the perfect life, quite a paradox, for it seems his life was quite unrewarded, in the end, a failure. But Christian faith looks to its “real end,” when after death Jesus was raised and made “Lord” with “all power on heaven and earth.”¹⁴ The Christian message proclaims that if we suffer with Christ, we too will reign with him.¹⁵

This story, this answer to human plight, has been very effective over some two millennia now. It has inspired many men and women to do great things, and sublime art work, but also has been misused for the opposite purposes for which it was intended. We discussed this briefly in chapter two above. But here the issue is how effective and satisfying the Christian answer is to the question of God’s silence and hiddenness, to his seeming not to care or be involved. I think that our cry, our query to God, “Why have you abandoned me?,” or “Why do you not care, if you exist at all?,” can come up with no better answer than the story of Jesus. It may be an insufficient answer for many, and may even be insufficient for everyone at one time or another, for at least a spell of one duration or another. But it does seem to me to correspond to what Jesus himself said: “Seek and you will find, knock and it shall be opened to you.” In our quest for an answer, for comfort, for guidance in this world, in our inquiry about God, we have found this answer, and it is up to us to accept it or not, to believe this story or not, and to be coherent with the consequences. That much we can grant to Jesus: he was coherent, he was true to what he believed. We cannot help but be impressed, and inspired, by his faithfulness to his call and destiny, as he saw it. Surely this is a promising thing, a ray of light in this dark world.

I will finish with a beautiful poem by Edward Shillito (1872-1948) which I discovered in Bishop Fulton’s Sheen’s *Life of Christ*.

¹⁴ Matthew 28:18; Romans 1:3-4; Hebrews 1:3-4.

¹⁵ Second Letter to Timothy 2:11-12.

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.