

## DID GOD HEAR THEIR CRY?<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 3 September 2023**

From Genesis 3:

I have heard the cry of my people.<sup>2</sup>

From Gerard Manley Hopkins:

And my lament  
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent  
To dearest him that lives alas! away.<sup>3</sup>

Today is the 84<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. That day in 1939 was also a Sunday. At 9.15pm, our then Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, said, in a radio broadcast:

Fellow Australians, it is my melancholy duty to inform you officially that, in consequence of a persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her, and that, as a result, Australia is also at war.<sup>4</sup>

I imagine that my parents listened to his broadcast. I was just two months and eight days old and I must have been asleep. Thus, the first six years of my life were spent in war. I experienced an absent father; my first memory of him is in uniform. We lived with rationing; I recall but one bar of chocolate, a gift from our doctor when I was ill. I recall our neighbour's car with white painted mudguards for the blackout, and a wood gas generator on the back, a storage bag for the gas on its roof. I have a memory of the Japanese attack on Sydney Harbour on the night of 3 May 1942. But, safe in Australia, I was protected from the violence that engulfed Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and, after 7 December 1941, much of Asia and the Pacific.

Today, 84 years ago, began violence and death on an industrial scale. Bombing of cities, deaths of millions of service personnel and civilians, death from forced labour, the creation of a generation of injured and traumatised people, and, above all, the deliberate extermination of millions of Jews in the horror of the Holocaust. Also destined for extinction were persons with disabilities, Jehovah's Witnesses, gypsies, and homosexuals.

The most modern technology was used to create new weapons: rockets, a death gas, and finally the atomic bomb. Total war led to incendiary pattern bombing and the elimination of whole cities. Neither side was free from both the creating and the enduring of horrors.

Today, we see a new war in one of the locations of the German attempt to conquer the Soviet Union, where two dictators pitted their people against each other, and the successor of one of them now tries to recover territory lost in the ultimate dissolution of his predecessor's empire.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Genesis 3:7-9

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, "I wake and feel the fell of day", ['I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day' by... | Poetry Foundation](#); [I wake and feel the feel of dark, not day - Poem Analysis](#)

<sup>4</sup> [War in Europe Again - 'My Melancholy Duty' | National Library of Australia \(nla.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [The 20th-Century History Behind Russia's Invasion of Ukraine | History | Smithsonian Magazine](#)

Our own region's peace is uncertain. We would deceive ourselves if we thought that today we remember a past event from which the world has recovered.

And where was God? This is not a sceptic's question. As Rupert Shortt has said:

The believer ... knows that times without number in the history of humanity, terrible earthquakes, tsunamis, plagues, famines, wars and all manner of other disasters have struck, killing, maiming, destroying lives—and *God does nothing to stop them*.<sup>6</sup>

Here we have one of the greatest challenges to our faith. We are less challenged by sex, by cultural trends, by what some may regard as the creeping takeover of secular thought. Here, we are challenged, not by what others reject, but by what we believe; that God creates and sustains us; that God loves us, and that Jesus lived, died and rose for us.

This question has confronted no group more than the Jews who were persecuted precisely for their religion. Many others were also confronted. So, the first thing to say is that calamities such as these are not brought on us by God as punishment for our sins, whatever they may be. While nobody is free from sin, the scale of world wars is so great that most of the postulated punishment is too severe. The Second World War, with its many horrors, was all our own work. The former British Chief Rabbi, the late Lord Jonathan Sacks, noted that the holocaust arose in one of the most civilised of all human cultures, the culture that produced Bach and Beethoven, Goethe and Kant. He ended his comments in this way:

After the Holocaust some people lost their faith. Some people kept their faith and some people found faith in God. But after the Holocaust it is morally impossible to believe in man. The Holocaust is the final, decisive refutation of the idea that you can have a humane civilisation without fear of heaven and without belief in the sanctity of life. The Holocaust may make some lose their faith in God, but it must make all people lose their faith in humankind. After Auschwitz you have to be either very ignorant or very naïve to believe in secular humanism. The real challenge of the Shoah is not to faith, but to lack of faith.<sup>7</sup>

But shifting the blame to ourselves does not answer the question about the creation and its Creator who must surely bear ultimate responsibility. If we return to Rabbi Sacks, we have the beginnings of an answer. Reflecting on his first visit to Auschwitz, Sacks said:

[W]ords came into my mind. ... "I was in the words, 'You shall not murder.' I was in the words, 'You shall not oppress a stranger'. I was in the words that were said to Cain when he killed Abel, (the first murder in the Bible). 'Your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground.'"

And suddenly I knew that when God speaks and human beings refuse to listen, even God is helpless in that situation. ... God gives us freedom and never takes it back. But He tells us how to use that freedom. And when human beings refuse to listen, even God is powerless.

This morning's reading from Exodus gives us a clue. Moses was keeping his father-in-law's sheep when he saw the burning bush. He thought that it was something he must see. So, he turned aside and, "When the Lord saw that he had turned aside, God called to him out of the bush".<sup>8</sup> In support of Sacks, no action on our part to seek and listen, no word from God.

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<sup>6</sup> Rupert Shortt, *The Hardest Problem: God, Evil and Suffering* John Murray Press, 2022, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Shortt, p. 122 Jonathan Sacks, Indaba Lecture, 4 June 2015;

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ixGCAe58\\_A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ixGCAe58_A) See also, [Curriculum Resources | Topic 1: God and the Holocaust | Rabbi Sacks](#) | הרב זקס

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 3:4

When we turn to Paul writing to the Romans in today's epistle reading, we find reiterated an expansion of the words quoted by Sachs, instructions to good living. We must begin to listen and to act. Our own immediate history has exhibited claims to follow God in the context of extensive failures both to listen and to act. We cannot continue to blame God if we fail to use our freedom responsibly. But our question is not yet fully answered.

We could turn to Job, the one book of the Bible explicitly asking the question about apparently undeserved suffering. Job's so-called friends take it in turn to explain to Job why he suffers. Eliphaz, the dogmatic theologian, talks about God, spouting pious phrases taken from religious sources such as the Psalms, but never addressing Job's situation. Bildad, the clever lawyer, defends God's justice. Zophar, the philosopher, urges Job to think properly about God.

In the end, Job abandons any attempt to explain his suffering. Instead, he speaks to God rather than about God. In his analysis of Job, David Burrell notes that:

as creatures we might dare to enter into this founding relation with the Creator who gives each of us our very being, and should we do so, the personal boundlessness of that relation will allow us "to go on."<sup>9</sup>

Rowan Williams confirms this approach when he comments that we should not say that there is a reason for everything, even such horrors as a world war. On the contrary, he asserts that

the Christian looking back over a life containing suffering and tragedy and trauma can say that it has all been drawn together by grace, rather than that it's all vindicated or justified.<sup>10</sup>

It is now time to turn to today's gospel in which Jesus sets his face towards his death, provoking Peter to object. God's grace will not be served by our seeking to protect and save God.

God is not a magnified version of ourselves. He does not need us to protect him and is not damaged by our failure.<sup>11</sup>

But what about "taking up our cross"? Jesus is not here talking about making suffering in general a spiritual gift. Rather, it is the cost of our commitment to him. The idea of taking up our cross will not help us to interpret suffering more broadly. Far less should we make a virtue of unacceptable suffering.<sup>12</sup>

I approached this sermon with great fear. I run the risk of Job's friends, of talking about God, not to God. I run the risk of a privileged person with minimal experience seeking to talk to great suffering and fear, of doing the very thing that I have rejected. I run the risk of commending what God has asked us to do, while not myself acting effectively. I run the risk of talking when I should be listening.

Eighty-four years ago today, began a war that I thankfully was too young to fight in. I was too old to be conscripted for Vietnam. My son has not been required to fight a war and I pray that my grandsons will not face such a future, although, since they are Americans, I fear for them.

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<sup>9</sup> David Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering*, Brazos Press, 2008, pp. 109-110

<sup>10</sup> Shortt, p. xiii

<sup>11</sup> Shortt, p.56

<sup>12</sup> [Take up your cross - by Andrew McGowan - Andrew's Version \(substack.com\)](#)

If there is no explanation for tragedy, there is no explanation for good fortune. There is only listening and acting.

“Jesus of the Scars”, a poem by First World War chaplain, Edward Shillito:

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.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [“Jesus of the Scars” by Edward Shillito | The Jesus Question](#) Edward Shillito (1872–1948) was a Free Church minister, who served as a Congregational Military Chaplain in France and Belgium in the trenches of the First World War.



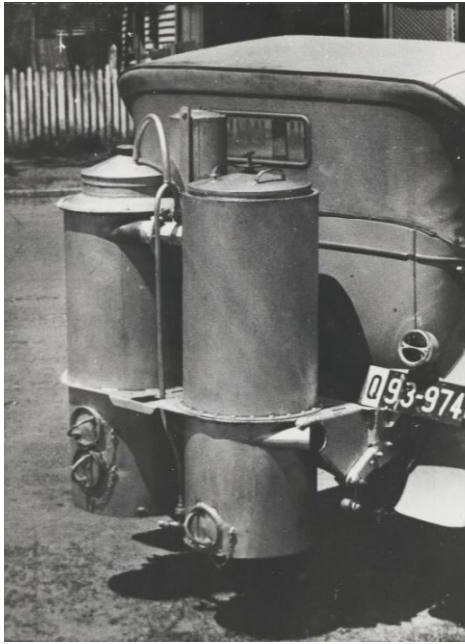
*Moses at the Burning Bush*  
William Blake (1757-1827)  
Victoria and Albert Museum



Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ (1844-1899)



Charles Lutyens, *Crucifixion*, 1984.



WWII car with wood gas generator