

**Monday 31 January, 2022: God's Questions**

*A sermon preached by the Revd Dr Kevin Lenehan (Master – Catholic Theological College, University of Divinity), at St Paul's Cathedral on the Opening of the Legal Year*

**Readings** [Genesis 4:3-10](#); [Romans 12:1-21](#)

The Czech philosopher and Templeton Prize-winner, Tomas Halik urges us to recognise that God comes to us more in the form of a question than in the form of an answer. Answers are for mathematical equations and technical problems; when the boundless and unfathomable aliveness that is God addresses us humans, a field of enquiry and questioning is opened up in our awareness that a well-defined answer can never satisfy. Some questions are so good, Halik claims, that they exceed and overflow all our attempts to answer them.

So those of us who seek meaning and purpose in the texts of the Bible should be ready to spend the rest of our lives living up to and living out of the questions the divine Word puts to us through these texts, beginning from the very opening pages of the book of Genesis: in the creation narratives, the Creator God seeks out the original man and woman, who have closed their hearts to their creator and sought to be their own gods, and asks them, 'where are you?' (Gen 3:9). And to the offspring of those proto-parents, tortured now by envy and shame and the desire for revenge, God asks 'where is your brother?' (Gen 4:9).

Where are you?; where is your brother, your sister? For Christians, our theories of human personhood and dignity, of social life and the common good, of individual and corporate rights and responsibilities, are attempts – always tentative and inadequate – to respond to those originating questions by which God continues to dialogue with humans. Because these are questions that we cannot answer once and for all, by deduction of principles or the imperative of duty; they are temporal and contextual. Consistency and identity emerge from telling the story

of our repeated efforts to respond adequately to the questions, where are you? Where is your sister, your brother?

And the response to one question is tied up on our answer to the other. Where I am, at any particular point in time, has everything to do with whether I am aware and responsive to the situation of my brother or sister; just as in becoming aware of and responding to the situation of my sister or brother I am also made aware of where I am in relation to my deepest self and to the source and goals of my life.

For the Lutheran pastor and scholar Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the National Socialist government's 1933 legislation to prohibit ethnic Jews from holding positions in the civil service marked the beginning of a life-changing entry in to the depths of those questions, where are you? Where is your brother, sister? Initially, Bonhoeffer's concern was for Christian church members of Jewish descent, such as the husband of his twin sister Sabine, and including several pastor with whom Dietrich was close, who would be barred from their positions in the Evangelische Kirche under the new legislation. However, very quickly Bonhoeffer's concern was extended, not least by daily prayer based on the psalms of the Old Testament, and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in an awareness that he was compelled to speak and act in solidarity not only with Christians of Jewish descent, his brothers and sisters in Christ's Church, but with every Jewish person, who was also – he came to understand – his brother or sister in Christ. So too he found himself called some years later, when imprisoned by the Nazis in Berlin's Tegel military prison on suspicion of cooperation with the military resistance movement, called to solidary with his fellow prisoners, many of them non-believers, communists, disinterested in religion, yet willing to struggle and suffer in order to uphold a free, just and humane social order. Through his deepening contemplative practice in prison, Bonhoeffer recognised that these too, the non-religious and unbelieving, were his brothers and sisters in Christ.

For Bonhoeffer, this solidarity and care for others, recognising their aspirations and vulnerabilities, offering them one's concern as for a brother or sister, working together to resist the dangers that threaten them, was the only human act strong enough to disempower the dynamics of exclusion, hate, and violence that were at work in his society. But the Scriptures remind us that the dynamics of resentment, hate and violence are not confined to any one

historical or cultural setting; they pose a continuous threat to human communities, 'lurking at the door' (Gen 4:7) of our hearts, our interactions with one another, the personal realm and the public order. Indeed, perhaps we can see the great narrative arc of the Judeo-Christian scriptures – from the mythic scene of Cain and Abel at one end of the bible through to Paul's urgent and practical advice to the first Christian community at Rome at the other – as the slow, stumbling, uneven attempt by humans to learn to live together without killing each other. Can we hear the voice of the Creator addressing us through the long story of the Bible with another unanswerable question: Can you live together without killing each other? And of course, today we are conscious that our living together extends beyond the human community to include the diverse life forms that make up our habitat.

As we hear St Paul's exhortation to a Christian community living in the midst of Roman society in the mid-first century, we can understand it as a kind of pedagogy of human life together without killing each other. It begins by the 'renewing of our minds' as we orient our lives towards God in a sacrifice of praise, learning to think about ourselves and others differently than the rivalrous, resentful and exclusionary habits of thinking that dominate public discourse. Think moderately about yourself, Paul urges, as one part of a body of many parts, many gifts; let love be genuine, avoid evil, compete in showing honour to each other; be resilient, patient, hopeful, hospitable, prayerful; bless those who treat you badly, do not repay evil for evil, never avenge yourself; care for your enemies; do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. What is this teaching but a code of conduct for living together without killing each other? It may owe some debt to the Stoicism and Romanitas with which Paul was familiar but a far greater debt is owed to the Teacher of the Sermon on the Mount, who 'loved us and gave himself for us' (Gal 2:20), forgiving his torturers with his dying breath.

The renewal of our minds that St Paul speaks involves a releasing of our thought patterns from the expectations of rivalry, competition and exclusionary violence as normative ways of living together; it involves letting go of the self that comes to exist only through opposition and exploitation of an other. This letting go of a self built on fear and envy requires of type of contemplative openness and receptivity to the presence of others; it calls for the inner stillness and deep listening that Aunty Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman, the 2021 Senior Australian of the Year, refers to by the indigenous word *dadirri*.

The signs of an increasingly anxious and fearful stance towards the challenges of living together in this world are never far away. Recently, the Washington Post reported that the US firearm sales in the month of January 2021 increased by 80% year on year, with more than two million firearms purchased that month alone. The previous year 2020, nearly 23 million firearms were bought, representing a 64 percent jump year over year. And this increase in private weapon ownership in the COVID years of restricted work, reduced travel and limited public events. And we are well-enough acquainted with the human story to be unsurprised that eventually some of those weapons are turned on others. The same newspaper reports a total of over 1000 deaths by gun violence last month, January 2022, including 400 gun deaths in the first four days of this new year. Of course, increasing gun violence is only one of many indicators that people find the task of living together to be a burden almost too difficult to bear.

Dorothy Day, who died in the East Village of New York City in 1980, is on the path to canonisation as a saint in the Catholic Church. A radical activist, nonviolent campaigner and co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement who shared her life with the poor and exploited women and men of the city, Day's spirituality was deeply influenced by the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ, the Body of many bodies described by St Paul in Romans 12. She wrote: "We are all one. We are one flesh in the Mystical Body, as man and woman are said to be one flesh in marriage. With such a love one would see all things new; we would begin to see people as they really are, as God sees them." And that includes those we find difficult to love. 'All men are brothers, yes, but how to love your brother or sister when they are sunk in ugliness, foulness, and degradation, so that all the senses are affronted? How to love when the adversary shows a face to you of implacable hatred, or just cold loathing? The very fact that we put ourselves in these situations, I think, attests to our desire to love God and our neighbour.' Our attempts to love, imperfect and limited though they be, are themselves a kind of witness, evidence of our desire to live together without killing each other. It was a cause of lifelong regret for Dietrich Bonhoeffer that as a newly ordained pastor he has taken the advice of a senior churchman and declined the invitation to officiate at the funeral service of his brother-in-law's (Jewish) father. Still, the regret and repentance he experience became a motivation for clearer awareness and greater solidarity with the vulnerable and suffering in the following years. God can use even our stumbling and begrudging efforts to deal with others justly and compassionately.

As we join together in worship to mark the Opening of the 2022 Legal Year, and to ask God's care and blessing for ourselves, our colleagues and those for whom we labour, let us pray that we may be willing to 'put ourselves in the situation', as Dorothy Day encourages, of treating each and every other as a brother or sister in Christ. To allow God's Word to echo in our hearts and minds: where are you? where is your brother, your sister?, and to move us to respond as best we are able each day.