

Reflection 5th December 2010

One of the group of 'Militant Atheists', Christopher Hitchens, has throat cancer and may be dying. In a newspaper article about him last week, there was talk about the meaning of this illness. Listen to this quote 'For the religiously zealous, the arch atheist suffering suffering a mortal illness spoke of divine retribution -the unacknowledged irony being that belief in such a vindictive god served only to endorse Hitchens' thesis. For more secular moralists, a different kind of cosmic accountancy was at work. The celebrated drinker and smoker...had succumbed to a cancer associated with drinking and smoking.'

So what caught my attention in this article was the idea of a 'cosmic accountancy.' This is because although the phrase is mentioned in a secular context, it is very much a *religious* idea. Christianity, among other religions has an idea about 'how the universe is set up'. God is 'King of the Universe' and has set the universe up with its own powers, to a degree. How these powers work in connection with the will of God could be described as a 'cosmic accountancy.' The New Testament talks about this as 'the divine Economy'. This is very similar to 'accountancy' Yes? The word we have for 'Economy' comes from two greek words 'Oikos' a house and 'nomos' a law. So 'oiko - nomy' refers to 'the laws of how the household runs. All one needs to do is to shift the termi-

nology a little and instead of having a 'divine economy' one has 'cosmic accounting'

Within this idea is contained the assumption that the universe has certain *laws* that we can rely on. In Christopher Hitchens' case, one of them is: 'if you smoke and drink, you are more likely to get cancer.'

This corresponds somewhat to the Hindu idea of 'Karma'. Many people these days believe in 'Karma' as a form of Justice. Karma says: If you do bad things now, then bad things will happen to you later' or 'What goes around, comes around.' Each person is responsible for their own Karma, so 'you've only got yourself to blame' when so called 'bad' things happen to you. That is what the hindus would say to Christopher Hitchens.

But the question comes to me 'What then is the Christian 'cosmic accounting, or divine economy'?

I was speaking to a person the other day, who has had a very hard life. They said 'Maybe God is punishing me for something I did, so I have to accept my punishment now?'

Is that so? Does our God do this kind of thing? I don't think so. How then does it work?

The first thing to say is that God loves us. All we have to do is to look at Jesus to see how much God loves us. When Jesus came across peo-

ple who were blind or suffering, he did not say 'Well, here is what you deserve because you were bad.' He said, if you read John's Gospel about this matter, 'The way we are now, whatever that might be, is so that God's glory might be shown.'

It is true that because the 'powers' in this world have their own capacity. not all of them are directed toward the loving purposes of God.

The prophets knew this when they longed for days when people would turn their spears into pruning hooks, or when the lion would lie down with the lamb and the little child would play over the viper's nest and not be harmed. This represents the Judaeo-Christian divine economy.

There *are* things that we do which release powers into the world for which we are responsible, and for which we have to take responsibility. Some of these things have to do with our personal health. Some of them have to do with our social relations. (As prisoners say: do the crime and do the time).

But as the prophets also knew, some of the way we are received, is because the divine economy runs up against the other 'law' that is at work in the world.

Think about Jeremiah, who preached during the siege of Jerusalem. He said 'You can talk all you like about being protected by having 'the temple of the lord' but unless

you actually do justice, it won't do you any good.' The same happened with Jesus who also preached against the Temple in the name of a compassionate God. He was crucified. Did he bring it on himself? Maybe. Did he deserve it as a lawbreaker? No. The divine economy according to Peter in this case is 'This Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ.'

When we are faced with difficulties, like physical pain, or psychological pain, the temptation is to stop believing in God's love for us, because the present pain seems to contradict being loved. It is easier to believe that we are being punished for something by God, than to believe that God still loves us.

How might we show forth God's glory (meaning, live out the true divine accounting) when the world seems to contradict it? Listen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his hymn for a new year (TIS 617)
And when this cup you give is filled to brimming with bitter suffering hard to understand we take it thankfully and without trembling out of so good, and so beloved, a hand. That is the challenge of living the Christian 'cosmic accounting.'

Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest

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