

The Holodomor of 1933 - Spiritual Reflections

Faith

During that nightmarish year of 1933 somewhere between 7-10 million people died, one third of whom were children.

*Rouse thyself! Why sleepest thou, O Lord?
Awake! Do not cast us off for ever!
Why dost thou hide thy face?
Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression? Psalm 43:1,2*

How can one speak of faith when faced with meaningless suffering and violence? And yet it is by faith that our life is governed and everything that we do is based, eventually, on faith. The most obvious question is - what is faith and here, many answers can be given, but the most enriching and deepest is that we do not despair of life. We live by the credo that there is meaning in our existence no matter how much we are challenged.

*Rabbi Simelai states in the Babylonian Talmud that
Moses had six hundred and thirteen commandments,
David reduced these to eleven, Isaiah to two,
And Habakkuk condensed them to one:
“But the righteous shall live by his faith.” (Hab 2:4)*

We often hear of the need to believe in Christ, to have faith in Him and this is true and important. But there is something else as well. We are not only saved by our faith in Christ but also we are saved through His faith, through His faithfulness to God and who God is, and here there is something instructive for us.

There is something that we recite in our creed. Christ is God and human without these two aspects being adulterated or mixed. He is totally and completely God and totally and completely man. This obviously is something that stretches our logical thinking but it is accepted on faith - by being faithful to what we know about Christ. One of the things that comes out of this is that Christ as man did not know his final fate.

We sometimes do not appreciate the gravity in which Christ as man was placed. He teaches, he lives all the time as a true man with all that this implies. He is arrested and goes to the cross not knowing whether his mission will be successful. Hence, we have the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. We often think of Christ knowing in advance and yet, being truly human, his ultimate fate was uncertain even for him.

This world is racked with pain and it is this pain that brings into question the reality of faith.

Those innocent people and children surely were puzzled by what it was that was being placed on their shoulders. Why? And no answer came but instead they were forced to undergo a painful and lingering death.

And what does this do to our faith? How do we incorporate this act of savagery into our world view? And it is so easy at this point to blame God, to hold Him responsible. It is so easy to be overwhelmed with the unspeakable horror that was perpetrated by those who were made in the image of God. But maybe we are going about it in the wrong way by trying to find a cause and to somehow, then rationalize this immense sea of suffering.

Let us explore this event from another perspective - that of faith. Suppose that we are asked to pray for someone whom the medical doctors have described as terminally ill. There is no physical or organic basis for expecting healing - the person is doomed to die. And we, in our faith turn to God with prayers that this may not be so, that the person may be made well. And sometimes - although it seems very rarely - the person is made well. But many times, the inexorable progress of illness is not stopped and the person dies. Have our prayers been in vain? Why have they not been answered? Why do we pray at all in these situations when the overwhelming evidence seems to be that it will not physically change anything?

These difficult events in our lives try our faith and faithfulness in God. Even if no physical miracle occurs, we still pray because we are faithful to God and what He has revealed about Himself. Our prayers are a protest against the way the world is. We say that this is the way of the unfallen world where miracles are common and dying is foreign. But, we know that this is not the way it is right now - we still live in a fallen world, but we register our disagreement with the way things are.

There are mysterious words written by St. Paul that we complete Christ's suffering. Maybe in some way the death of these innocent millions of living souls contributes to the completion of Christ's task of salvation of this fallen world. Just as Christ's death at the hands of men saves us and transforms death, maybe the death of these innocents is also part of that ongoing process of salvation.

*Sacred are the victims, for each dies in the place of someone whom fate allows to live.
And though many may unwittingly or unwillingly die in the place of others,
the sacrifice is no less sacred for the fact that
fate chose those who would make it. Dark Rivers of the Heart, Dean Koontz*

Some would question this kind of thinking as merely a wish to dampen the blows of this tragedy. But, and this is where our faith comes in, we have seen a template in Christ and we apply it to others who were made in his image. It is through faith that we come to this understanding of this tragedy and not just through a deep desire to lessen our pain.

And there is another point that I would like to focus on. Sometimes one hears criticism of those who died for not resisting, for not physically arising and struggling against the injustice that was

being perpetrated against them. True, some did resist but the vast majority did not. And do we not have here another echo of Christ's behavior? Was he not led as an innocent lamb to the slaughter without offering one iota of resistance?

Let us see this tragedy from another point of view.

How often does God transform a tragedy into unexpected results, totally contrary to what perpetrators of evil had in mind. There is a saying over one of the monasteries on Mount Athos:

Die before you die so that when you die you will not die.

Indeed, these millions who died, died a death imposed on them and they accepted this death. In a sense, they became like millions of monks in a very deep and mysterious sense - they became divested of all possessions, even their very lives. An atheist regime, attempting to stamp out all vestiges of faith, ironically has transformed the land into one vast monastery testifying to faith in and trust in God, showing that without God, the greatest tragedies become the norm. The monks used to flee into the desert to escape a corrupt world and here, evil men created a barren desert out of a fruitful land. The land that had previously been brimming with God's bounty was now likened to a desert where bread is scarce. What evil human hands had wrought!

It is better for one man to die for the nation, utters the high priest. It is the underlying fact of our universe that we are interrelated and do not exist as solitary islands but our actions do impact others in ways that may not even be known to us. And inexorably, in some incomprehensible fashion to our earth-bound minds, good does come out of tragedy.