



saddest day in the Jewish calendar. It was on that day in 587BC that the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple of Solomon. *On the same day* over 500 years later, the armies of the Roman Empire led by Titus began their attack on the city. Once again, the temple was lost. The Romans attacked at the time of Passover and so many pilgrims from many nations were caught up in the siege. Filled with crosses, the Mount of Olives ran with blood. There was starvation, cannibalism, disease and gang violence. The people hoped and prayed for deliverance, for liberation by the God of the Exodus, but there was no deliverance. The city was lost.

Whether a prophecy of Jesus or a later theological reflection of the Church, the key point is found in Jesus' teaching about the fig tree. Jesus had said that there would be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars and people would faint from fear but, crucially, God was near. Jesus told His disciples that the Kingdom of God was near. Amidst the poetic

apocalyptic language, Jesus told His followers to focus on one thing only: God is with you, among you, within you; God is near.

In this ancient story, in the carnage of Jerusalem's destruction, Jesus spoke of the intimacy and immediacy of God. There is no suggestion in His words of miraculous deliverance. God is real and true and present, but there is no parting of the Red Sea or anything like it; Jerusalem crumbles under the might of Rome. If we stand with Jesus in the temple precinct or sit with Him on the Mount of Olives, take to heart the words He says: 'The Kingdom of God is near, among you, within you.' Sometimes it is only when tragedy or trial come our way that we learn in a new, deep and profound way the meaning of these words. For me, Jesus was shifting our understanding of God: away from the external God of heaven, the God who holds back the water for the Hebrew slaves but not the Egyptians, to a God among, between and within us.

The New Testament scholar and theologian, the late Marcus Borg, has been a significant influence on my spiritual journey. Born in Minnesota, he retired as Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University in 2007. His insight into Scripture, the depth of his historical research and the humanity of the man were persuasive. Above all, the love, devotion and commitment Marcus had to Jesus was inspiring and life-changing. His honesty in faith and scholarship was refreshing.

In his most recent book, published posthumously, Marcus describes his conversion to mysticism. One of the factors which contributed to his conversion was his dis-ease with the supernatural concept of God. He did not like the word 'God' because, for him, it implied a supernatural being; a separate and distinct being who had created the universe a long time ago. Marcus was also cautious of the alignment of

a supernatural separate God with parental imagery, especially 'Father'. Marcus said:

The imagery of God is rich. It suggests a relationship of intimacy, dependence, and protection. Our parents, if we had good parents, loved us and took care of us when we were little. Considerable evidence shows that most of us have a deep desire, sometimes unconscious, for a cosmic parent who will take care of us as our parents did when we were infants and toddlers and children. Or, if we had negligent parents, we want a parent who will take care of us better than our parents did.

Parent theism is often associated with God as authoritarian, the law-giver and disciplinarian; the finger-shaking God.

Through his teenage years, Marcus became more doubtful and anxious about this supernatural Father. During his college years, he became agnostic about such a God and by his twenties agnosticism had given way to atheism.

Alongside his gradual separation from God as supernatural Father, Marcus had a spiritual experience: only years later would he have the confidence to describe his experience as mystical. As a young man, he was driving through a sunlit

rural Minnesota winter landscape, alone in a nine-year-old MG two-seater roadster. He had been driving for three hours when he entered a series of S-curves. He said:

The light suddenly changed. It became yellowy and golden, and it suffused everything I saw; the snow-covered fields to left and right, the trees bordering the fields, the yellow and black road signs, the highway itself. Everything glowed. Everything looked wondrous. I was amazed.

Marcus said that the whole experience lasted a minute and then faded. He said, 'It was the richest minute of my life'.

Years later, he had another such experience on a flight from Tel Aviv to New York. His face was wet with tears; he was filled with joy. He said, 'I felt that I could live in that state of consciousness forever and it would never grow old.

Everything was glorious, filled with glory'. For many years, Marcus had been skeptical about these experiences but he came to describe them as the most real thing in his life.

Avoiding the word 'God', mystics often speak of the numinous; moments of radical amazement; the golden world; or cosmic consciousness. Marcus said that

everything was filled with glory: in the Bible, 'glory' means radiance or luminosity.

Mystical moments are not necessarily everyone's experience of life and faith. What is most important about the journey Marcus made was the gentle transition from one theology to another, from one concept of God to a new and different one. We see this same transition very clearly in the Book of Job. For most of the book, chapter after chapter, Job is wrestling with the concept of God as righteousness, as a righteous judge who cruelly punishes the wicked. Job's friends tell him that he must have been bad to deserve the terrible suffering he has to endure at God's hand. But, in the final chapters, Job has a vision. He sees the glory of God in creation; for Job, creation was luminous. God was everywhere.

God is everywhere. St Paul said, 'In God we live and move and have our being'. In the Book of Psalms, the psalmist

asks, 'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?' The reply is:

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the grave, you are there also.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

Marcus said that there have always been simple, straightforward Christians: people who in simple faith trusted in God. But others need articulation of what Christian faith means.

Sadly, in Western Christianity that has manifested itself in the most arcane controversies. In the 1600s, the Reformed tradition was almost torn apart by supra-lapsarianism and infra-lapsarianism. Few congregations in the Church of Scotland this morning will be enjoying a sermon on lapsarianism! 'At issue was whether God decided to send a messiah (Jesus) before the first sin (because God knew it

would happen) or only after it had happened (because only then was it necessary).'

Doctrinal purity is not the real thing. Religion is poetry not philosophy. The earliest New Testament author, St Paul, wrote, 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'. That crucifixion of which Paul wrote is a dying to self. The more we silence ourselves the more we will hear God.

In our lesson, amidst all the dramatic action of sun, moon and stars, fear, fainting and the sword, I wonder if you also heard the silence, the stillness of the Sacred. If you take yourself into the scene, do you sense the calm, peace and shalom of Jesus? We are told in Scripture that Jesus was a man of prayer. Like Moses and Elijah, He regularly withdrew into solitude for long hours of prayer. In Christianity as in Judaism, verbal prayers are the first step in prayer. The deeper we go the more silent we become.

In Mark's Gospel, we read, 'In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed'. In Luke, we are told that Jesus went up a mountain to pray. On occasion, He prayed all night. Marcus Borg said that such lengthy hours of prayer spent alone do not imply verbal prayer but meditation and contemplation. We can hear the silence of the Sacred in Jesus' words to His disciples on the Mount of Olives. Even in the tragedy and trauma, we can feel the peace of Christ. With the eyes of faith, we can see the luminosity of Jesus.

We live in a time and society when the need for a new prevailing theology is urgent. Supra-lapsarianism or anything like it, we do not need. Can we still ourselves just long enough to enjoy stillness, to empty ourselves so that we may sense the Eternal? If we do that, then questions like, 'Does God exist?' just disappear.

Amen.