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PROVIDENCE

By David Phillips

O GOD, whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth; We humbly beseech thee to put away from us all hurtful things, and to give us those things which be profitable for us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 8th Sunday after Trinity)

When we pray these words we affirm that God is continually active in preserving and governing the world for the purposes which He proposes to accomplish. He is constantly ordering all things. These words are easily said but how comfortable are you with the doctrine of the providence of God? Were Christians in the past more willing to affirm providence and if so why are we not so willing?

Take for example the late 17th and early 18th centuries. This was the time when the belief system called Deism reached its peak. A deist believes in God but rejects the idea that God is directly involved in the world and its affairs and so they would deny the idea of providence. Yet in the middle of that period we find the 1701 Act of Settlement which boldly (and rightly) attributes the accession of William of Orange to the providence of God. Can you imagine any Act of Parliament today mentioning such a thing?

If we are uncomfortable with the idea of providence why is that? One reason is because we are influenced by a scientific worldview which can be presented as supporting a mechanistic understanding of the world. Isaac Newton was neither a deist nor an atheist, yet his scientific theories and philosophical speculations (he wrote more works on religion than on science and mathematics) together with those of Robert Boyle (as in Boyle's law) seemed to encourage the deism that was then emerging. They did believe that God orders the universe, but said He has done so by setting in place the laws of nature. God then stepped back, as it were. This denies that God is constantly active in ordering. Newton and others like him did not like the idea of miracle, nor indeed religious enthusiasm, and their faith appears cold and rationalistic.

As a creed of scientific materialism perhaps the words of another mathematician, Bertrand Russell, are as clear as any "Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be obtained by scientific method; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know." If there is a god then he is unknowable, except through science. It is an arrogant creed which glorifies man. Moreover, the statement itself cannot be obtained by scientific method and so by its own standards is not knowledge. In addition, such a view can only respond to evidence for miracles and for the knowledge of God by dismissing it because it does not fit the creed.

A recent interview on the BBC website with former D-Ream keyboard player (they were a pop group) and particle physicist Professor Brian Cox presented a more humble view of the scientific endeavour. Cox was even candid about the problems with the Big Bang theory. Some of the things he said revealed that many modern scientists are not struck by what they know, but by the growing recognition of how much they do not know. Describing the four fundamental forces, Cox said "gravity is so difficult to understand that it is out of our remit". He went on to say "there is something profound we do not understand about the universe". And, describing recent discoveries in his own field "our picture of the universe is falling to bits, but we are beginning to know where to look for the answers".

Anyone who is thoroughly wedded to the scientific and mechanistic worldview will have no place

for the providence of God because providence affirms that God is active in ordering His creation. This can seem like a God of the gaps theory, but only if you start by assuming that God cannot be involved. There appears to be patterns in creation, and Newton began the process of trying to mathematically define those patterns naming them laws of nature. “What goes up must come down” said Newton, and this is true of the arrogance of man. After three centuries we are no closer to understanding gravity and all the modern theories are shot through with problems. The more we look the bigger the gaps seem to get.

A second reason why many are uncomfortable with the idea of providence is because of what it says about suffering. If God is continually ordering the world then this means the ‘bad’ things as well as the ‘good’. An earthquake which kills thousands is part of the providence of God, as is the death of a loved one. It is easy to believe in providence when things are going well, much harder when we face or experience what appears to be gratuitous and unnecessary suffering.

Faced with this dilemma some flee from providence. Gottfried Leibniz is a name particularly associated with theodicy, the problem of suffering. Samuel Clarke, a close follower of Newton, responded to Leibniz by rejecting the providence of God. Clarke argued that if God were intimately involved in this world then, because of suffering, he would be a king in name only. Many found this view appealing, and it built on Newton’s ideas. But this served only to fuel the rise of deism.

If we abandon the notion of providence in order to ease the problem of suffering then we will soon abandon the heart of the faith. But why do we believe in providence?

It is possible to make a case for providence from reason, from arguments about the very nature of God. It is entirely reasonable to believe in a creator and to believe that this creator is continually active in preserving His creation. However, deism presents a reasonable alternative – that God has wound up his creation and let it run. There is no easy way from reason to choose between the two theories.

It is possible also to argue from experience. The 1701 Act of Settlement makes such a claim. Around the time when Newton was pondering on falling apples John Flavel wrote a book called “The Mystery of Providence” (1678). Flavel gives many examples of the providence in historical events – attributing them to the guiding hand of God. If one believes in providence these are strong corroborating evidence, but in general I think they are unlikely to persuade a sceptic. For example, Flavel says the manner of the death of Charles IX of France (bleeding all over his body) deliberately echoes the fact that the King made the canals of Paris flow with protestant blood. That is all very well and good, and similar to what is said of Herod in Acts, but the sceptic will say that better evidence for providence would have been the rescue of the French martyrs. Although the blood of the protestants in England sealed the reformation, that was not so in France, so it is harder to see God’s purposes. Was Flavel right to attribute so much to providence, or was he, as Newton and Leibniz would surely have thought, a passing remnant of a superstitious and irrational age.

So we come to the evidence of Scripture. Unlike Bertrand Russell we believe that science has its limits and that it is possible to know things which scientific endeavour can never tell us. That which is beyond the physical is beyond science, so too a knowledge of the future and to a large extent a knowledge of the past. Even within the physical sphere scientists are facing the fact that at the very least there is so much they do not understand, and the possibility that there are things they can never know. As Christians however, we affirm that there are things we know because God knows them, and because He has revealed them to mankind. These things include the nature of God Himself, the origin and destiny of creation and the working of God within creation.

We believe in providence because it is a truth so clearly taught in Scripture and we accept the

testimony of our Lord, that the Scriptures are true. The Old Testament is full of events which are clearly directed by God. Whether it be Joseph testifying ‘you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good’ or the whole book of Esther never mentioning God because the people appeared to be forsaken by God, yet at every turn showing the providence of God.

There are other incidents in the New Testament, but also many clear statements: “*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father*” (Mtt 10.29). “*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*” (Col 1.17). “*He did not leave you without evidence of himself in the good things he does for you: he sends you rain from heaven and seasons of fruitfulness; he fills you with food and your hearts with merriment*” (Acts 14.17). “*Upholding all things by the word of His power*” (Heb 1.3).

Ultimately we believe in the providence of God because God has so clearly revealed it. We cannot hide from the fact that this doctrine can be deeply uncomfortable, yet that does not make it untrue. In a further article in this issue some of the Biblical teaching is explored in more detail.

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