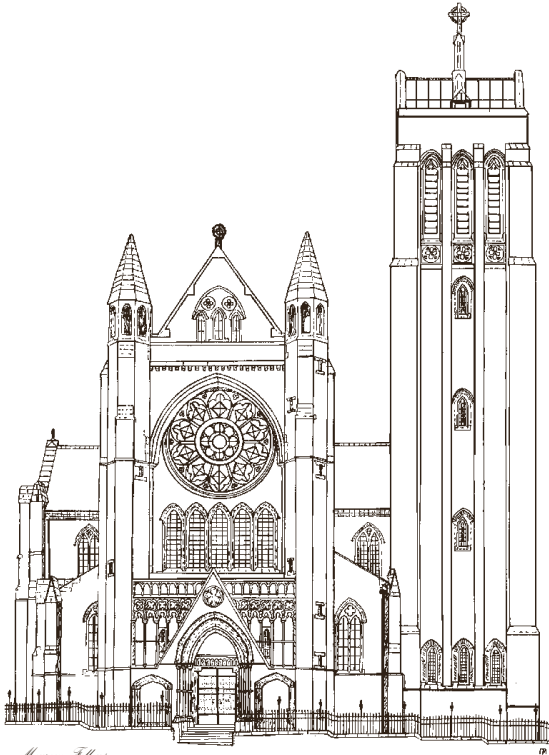




The Church of
St Alban the Martyr
Birmingham 12



ST ALBAN AND ST PATRICK PARISH MAGAZINE



Murison Fellows

**April
2020
70p**





Church of S Alban the Martyr
Conybere Street, Birmingham
(Traditional Anglo-Catholic)

(www.saintalban.co.uk)

Vicar: Revd Dr Gerald Sykes,

The Vicarage, 120 Stanhope Street, Birmingham B12 0XB

☎: 0121 440 0404

Sunday Services

Choral Mass 10.00 a.m. Solemn
Evening Service 6.00 p.m.

Weekday Masses

Thursday 11.30 a.m. Low
Saturday 9.00 a.m. Low
Saturday 5.00 p.m. Multimedia Mass (*Term Time*)
Holy Days of Obligation 7.30 p.m. Solemn

Confessions: By appointment

Authorized Eucharistic Ministers (*Bishop's Permission*)

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Mrs Verna Smith-Broadbent

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Dr Christopher Smith

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From The Vicarage

Dear all,

This month is certainly very different. Covid-19 has changed all our lives radically and we don't know how long the changes will last. Who would have thought that clergy would be banned from praying (even privately) in their churches? I believe that we have all risen to the challenge of making the best of this situation.

To try to keep everyone's spirits up I'm ringing round all our congregation. If I haven't rung you yet that means that I don't have your contact details. If I haven't 'phoned and you would like me to 'phone please get in touch by 'phone (0121 440 0404) or email (FrGerrySykes@gmail.com).

We all know that church is the people. Church comes from work Kriyakon meaning 'The Lord's House'. That word is not used in the New Testament. The word that we translate as church is Ekklesia, which means the 'ones called out' of the world or, to put it another way, the people of God. That being said, we are all missing our particular Lord's House — The Church building of St Alban the Martyr.

Without our beautiful building we are having to meet over the 'phone and on the internet. That is quite a challenge. At first I hoped that I could bring services to you from our building, but we have been told not to use the building at all. However, there is something nice about inviting you into my (virtual) study and having an intimate prayer or study time by the fireside. There was also something

special about celebrating Mass together in my dining room courtesy of Zoom.

I never thought that I would become a YouTuber, but now we have a St Alban's Highgate channel (www.youtube.com/channel/UCNn-ekekTEMnphY86X_KQxg), and you can find it by searching YouTube for St Alban's Highgate. Chris has done marvellous work putting the videos on our church web page (<http://www.saintalban.co.uk>).

We also need to commend Amanda for her work with the foodbank. This is going to be even more important for hard pressed folk than during normal times. Stanhope Hall under Monica's guidance is also doing fantastic work in the community and it is great that our church is able to give so much support.

Enough of thinking about our difficulties. Easter is approaching with its promise of resurrection. All difficulties can be redeemed by Jesus, and His resurrection gives us the guarantee of a better future. That's true even for those who will die in this pandemic. Death is not the end, eternal life is our destination. Easter may be different this year, but it will happen. We will find some way of celebrating the resurrection, though it will be unusual.

So, keep the faith, the Church is still here, and we remain part of it. We are the people called out of the world by God. Let us build the Lord's house in the World Wide Web.

Fr Gerry.

Problem of Evil

Welcome to the vicarage study once again. Study is an appropriate word, because today I am going to make you think. I'm making a talk out of an essay I wrote 22 years ago when I studied for my Bachelor of Divinity at Cardiff University. I'm sure more theology has been written on the subject of the problem of evil and suffering since then. I've changed it to be more personal and relevant to our present time.

So why there is a problem with evil.

Religions that believe in one God and believe that God is good and all powerful (that is Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are challenged by the problem of evil. There seems to be a logical problem with the belief that:

- (1) God exists, and is all powerful (omnipotent), and knows everything (omniscient);
and
- (2) God is good

1.2 Earlier ways developed to solve the problem of good and evil.

There are four classical theological approaches to solving this problem.

The first idea is to say that evil doesn't really exist. God is ultimate perfection and true reality. Beneath God there is a hierarchy of lesser perfection descending into total imperfection which is total non-being. God is perfectly good, so it follows that evil is total imperfection, or to put it another way, it doesn't really exist.

This view is "very counter intuitive" and needs a view of perfection that doesn't make sense in the 21st century. In fact, it's so far from the way we think today it's difficult to understand. Today we would say, "If my 'mortal mind' thinks I am miserable, then I am miserable, and it is not an illusion that I

am miserable".

The second way of getting around the problem is to deny that God omnipotent. God is engaged in a struggle (with Satan) to overcome evil.

The problem with this idea is it needs two principles of absolute reality, when you can only have one absolute reality — or the reality isn't absolute. The idea of Satan or fallen angels is also of little use because it begs the question why did God create angelic beings that could fall? Some thinkers have tried to get around this problem by saying God is in the process of overcoming disorder, but that leaves us with the problem of why there is disorder in the first place. This idea reminds us of the Gnostic heresy that there is an 'evil' creation at odds with God.

Some people might want to claim that God is the despot (to use the Greek word) the despotes, the ultimate ruler of the universe, and it is for God to choose what happens to every living thing. God's will is always right.

This idea does have some biblical backing, for example in the picture of the potter and clay and that view was held by Calvin, and by Barth in the 20th century. We should remember that the main view of kingship in the Old Testament is not despotism but is based on God's righteousness. Really despotism is another way of trying to say evil doesn't really exist. Despotism stresses God's power at the expense of God's Fatherhood and love. God is all powerful, but God isn't loving. Many people who suffer find this offensive. To the modern mind it condemns God as evil.

Then there is the Moral theory. This approach proposes that God is limited by God's own character of righteousness, truth

and love. There are various ways of using this idea, for example:

- 1) That God created the Best Possible World and that a world that contained less evil is in some way not as good.
- 2) Freewill defence: God cannot do things that are irrational or morally wrong. Just as $2 + 2$ can never equal 5, you and I cannot be both free and, at the same time, be forced to be good.

In our current situation some people have said that human destruction of nature is what caused coronavirus to jump from an animal disease to a human disease. God couldn't stop it because it was an inevitable consequence of our actions. We could also say today's fast travel by aeroplanes has led to the rapid spread of the disease. The same transport that contributes to global warming. This way of thinking is not saying that coronavirus is a punishment for our sins but came about because of the way we live today. That of course may well be true, but many people will suffer who are not responsible for the destruction of the environment or globalisation.

It doesn't speak to those who are suffering through no fault of their own. Jesus himself said "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them — do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Luke 13: 4.

The problem with all these ideas is that God is still responsible for evil because God chose to create this world of suffering. In contrast a number of 20th century theologians such as Moltman, Fiddes and Hick have tried to understand how evil can coexist with God without justifying God.

2. Starting with the Cross

For Moltman "The death of Jesus on the cross is the centre of all Christian

theology". Through the cross God enters into the problems and suffering of the world and answers them. Moltman rejects any approach that sees God as unmoved by the suffering of the world. Moltman argues that this idea leads us to the conclusion that God is a capricious demon.

In the light of the Somme, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam and today's human rights abuses it is easier to believe in the devil than in God. Far from seeing the absolute as good, and evil as nonbeing: the absolute seems to be evil, and good is the shadowy absence of evil. Moltman also argues that a God who cannot suffer is inferior to suffering humanity because humanity has the capacity to suffer which God cannot grasp. An omnipotent God is an incomplete being, because a God like that can't experience helplessness or powerlessness.

If we start our understanding with the cross, our view of God and of evil is transformed. God enters into the suffering world and swallows up death and evil. Evil can now be seen as anything that limits humanity, and a nothingness which consumes humanity. It is not the non-being of classic thought but an active and hostile non-being. It is an annihilating whirlpool into which existing things are sucked and which drains them of the potential by which they exist.

Jesus on the cross is the God who empties God's self into this whirlpool and so overcomes evil by getting rid of the negative. The cross is not God's explanation of evil; it is the response of God to evil that allows Christians to believe. The love (agape) of God, expressed through the cross liberates us from evil by freeing us from the inward and outward fetters of the flesh.

We are still left with the question, how can the Christian use God's suffering in a

way that helps faith. Fiddes develops the idea of God's suffering:

1) It helps us to know that God suffers too, and that God understands the impact of evil from within suffering. We don't have to justify God, in fact any attempt to justify evil is offensive to those of us who are suffering. If God's suffering is to be helpful to victims of evil, two conditions must be fulfilled; first, God must be ultimately victorious and so give hope to all who suffer; and second, God must suffer with each of us, and not just in the example of Jesus on the cross.

2) If God suffers, God is a victim of evil and not a capricious torturer of creation. If God is a victim of evil, God should not be seen as directly responsible for suffering in any way, even as a disciplinarian. God is not an all powerful game player who moves pieces about a chess board.

Yet, God might still be considered as indirectly responsible for evil by permitting suffering where it could be prevented. To put it another way, we must find some way of understanding why the world is as it is and why God might allow suffering. For God to create a world in which suffering is a possibility makes God responsible if evil and suffering occur.

3. Let's revisit Freewill

Hick recognises that Christ's suffering gives us some help. For many of us Christians this idea coupled with our own religious experience, effectively overcomes the challenge of evil. Even so, Hick wants to develop a more explicit understanding of evil that answers the problem that God is still responsible for suffering and evil.

Let's go back to the idea of original sin. Hick rejects the idea that all the problems start with Adam and Eve. That doesn't explain natural evils like earthquakes. Nor

does Hick feel it is reasonable for a wholly good world to become evil as a punishment for the first humans. Hick picks up the idea of the world as a 'vale of soul making' that originated with Irenaeus. Humans are made in the image of God but are not the finished article. Humans have to transcend the image of God to become the likeness of God.

The first stage of this process was the physical, the evolution of humanity. The second stage is our formation of God's likeness. This can't be done for us by an all-powerful God, because it needs a free response by humanity to God. Hick believes that God is justified in allowing evil to be part of this slow building up of individual goodness. The value of the world is not its ability to give us pleasure or pain but as a place for making our soul. Any world that did not contain evil would make humans into "God's pets" and not transform them into children of God.

Flew and Mackie disagree. They thought that it was possible for God to create a world where there is no evil, and everyone always turns to God but where humans are free to make choices at all stages. Humans could be free, but always choose God. Hick argued back that they do not have a strong enough view of freedom. Nothing can be predetermined. The situation must have an element of unpredictability. Mathematicians use ideas like chaos and fractal to describe this sort of unpredictability. In this idea of freedom, it becomes almost inevitable that humans will sin.

Hick then argues that to be given such freedom we must all be created at a distance from God, because any rational being living close to God would never fall because fall is irrational. Evolution has produced precisely the distance between God and humanity

that is needed. It also produces a world where the creator can be seen by faith but not proven by logic. Evil, though a necessary part of this world is not something that has value in itself, it is only valuable as something to overcome. If actions could never cause harm, there would be no possibility doing good or bad actions.

But, why is there so much evil? Could not Hiroshima have been avoided. Hick argues that there are no absolutes in evil and we could only ask the same question of a lesser evil such as the destruction of Rotterdam. But what about those of us who suffer and are never redeemed? Hick agrees that this would count against his views but believes that all humans are destined to be redeemed in the end.

When all of these arguments have been made, we can't get away from the idea that God is responsible for evil and suffering. Suffering is a necessary part of God's plan to form souls. Is making of souls all worth the suffering? Like Ivan in Dostoevsky's novel *The brothers Karamazov* we could feel that it would be better to hand back the entrance ticket because the price is too steep. Hick returns to the cross at this point. Jesus harmonises God's sovereignty with God's love and God's struggle with evil in the cross and resurrection.

Christ takes the reality of our existence and our struggle with evil into God so that living faith makes evil disappear. This does not mean the holocaust is nothing, it remains evil, and works against God. Yet in the end, God's good purpose for each of us who suffer will not be defeated.

4. Conclusions

Hick's arguments are attractive to many but have been criticised for seeming to give evil the dignity of having a rôle in God's purposes. In the end evil remains a mystery

that humans can seek to understand but never quite manage to explain. I believe that for the Christian, Moltman's approach is better than theological theories because it provides a way to live with the mysteries of evil and suffering. However, if we accept that God has taken the problem of evil on God's self through the cross, it is possible to revisit the classical ideas and see them as possible explanations for evil.

If God has taken our suffering into God's self then we can believe that evil might amount to nothing in the end. This doesn't have to be offensive to those who suffer because God is suffering with each of us, feeling our suffering as we feel it. The picture of God as a despot might also be purified from its offensiveness because we do not have the knowledge that allows us to judge God's purposes. God is not just a potter that shapes the clay of humanity, but God is also with and inside the clay and feels it being moulded. The cost of free will might not be too great because God is paying the price both by suffering with us and on the cross.

There is also an aspect of dualism in God's struggle with evil that culminates on the cross. This dualism is only in the context limits of this life. From the eternal perspective there is only one absolute, the Good, Loving and Omnipotent God.

I found all of these ideas helped me in the past. When Akole's and my second son, (Avi Daniel Sykes) died, it was these ideas that helped me to keep my faith and accept the mystery of evil. This was because my view of the world was centred on the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps the same ideas might also help you to keep your faith at this time of a global pandemic, the shutdown of our country and the suffering we and those around us experience.

The Church's Year — April

The first twelve days of April this year mark the climax of the holy season of Lent, leading up to the Festival of Easter, by far and away the most important Festival in the Church's year. Wednesday April 1st is the Wednesday in the week, which began with Passion Sunday on March 29th, which traditionally marks the beginning of Jesus' momentous journey towards Jerusalem. (I wrote about this more fully in my article for March). It is a sign of the importance of this period — the two most important weeks in the Church's year — that if another Festival occurs during this time, e.g. the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary (March 25th), depending on the date of Easter, that Festival is always transferred to a date after Easter week. This is a sure sign that the Church wishes us to concentrate spiritually upon the momentous events of these two weeks, especially Holy Week, which begins with Palm Sunday, April 5th. On this day Jesus entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey in fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah

century, when Christians were finally free from persecution, the scenes of Holy Week were re-enacted in Jerusalem, as they have been ever since, and we have a fascinating account of this tradition written by a Spanish nun, Egeria, who took part in these events.

This is why we try today as much as we can also to re-enact the solemn events of that first Holy Week, traditionally, of course, on Palm Sunday, with a procession of palms, singing such hymns as the magnificent 'All glory, laud and honour, To thee Redeemer King'. In my time in Poplar we would process for about a mile through the streets in the East End of London, in honour of that first Palm Sunday. It can greatly enrich our spiritual lives if, throughout Holy Week, we strive to give priority — in this one week out of fifty two in the entire year — to taking as much part as possible in the services and, indeed, drama of what was arguably the most influential week in the history of the world. Both Matthew and Luke give the impression that it was on the same day, after entering Jerusalem to the acclamation of the crowd, that Jesus went into the temple and was so appalled by the way in which the temple area was being abused that he 'overturned the tables of the money changers' and cast out those who sold doves for sacrifices — an action known as 'the cleansing of the temple'. This was obviously a deliberately provocative action — designed to bring things to a head, in fulfilment of the fact that 'the time had come for him to be received up' (Luke 9: 51). The climax of Holy Week is the *Triduum* (Latin for 'three days'), referring to Maundy



(9: 9), to the acclamation of the crowds. The events of this tremendous week — or octave, including Easter Day itself — made such an impression upon the early Christians that already in the fourth

Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Eve. ‘Maundy’ comes from the Latin *mandatum*, commandment, referring to Jesus’ words to his disciples at the Last Supper, “A new commandment I have given to you, that you should love one another” (John 13: 34). It was at the Last Supper that Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist, by taking bread and wine, and saying “This is my body” and “This is my blood” (of which the earliest account is to be found in I Corinthians 11: 23 – 26). From the earliest days Christians met together on Sunday — then a working day — the day of the Resurrection — to fulfil Jesus’ command, “Do this in remembrance of me”. As they did then, so we do now — regularly celebrating what is by far and away the most important service in the Christian Church.

Good Friday is arguably the most significant day in the Church’s year — the day on which our redemption was achieved by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, thereby fulfilling the whole of his ministry. What seemed to be the moment of defeat was, in fact, the moment of ultimate victory — unknown to the world then and still largely ignored by the world today. It is sometimes said that there are differences of emphases between the account of Jesus to be found in Paul and that to be found in the writings attributed to John, but on one essential point both Paul and John, those two giants of our Christian spirituality, are firmly united and that is the belief that “the blood of Jesus Christ ... cleanses us from all sin”, as John puts it (I John 1: 7) or, as Paul puts it, “In Christ we have redemption through his blood ... the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1: 14), a theme which is repeated many times in their writings

by both Paul and John. Many people are offended by this emphasis on blood (also found strongly in that magnificent writing, the Epistle to the Hebrews — “Christ, by his own blood, entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” — 9: 12 and throughout the Epistle) but this is an essential teaching of the Christian faith, saving it from being some airy-fairy philosophy and rooting it firmly in the facts of suffering, death, redemption and salvation. We should certainly try to attend a service in the church on Good Friday and, indeed, perhaps, take part in a, usually ecumenical, Procession of the Cross, which happens in many parts of the city on this day.

Easter Eve marks the day of Christ’s



repose in the tomb and should be a day of reflection and meditation, the last day of Lent, as we prepare ourselves for the tremendous celebration on Easter Day of that triumph which, unknown at the time, was achieved on Good Friday. It has been rightly said — and I have quoted this before, but it bears quoting every year! — that, whether Jesus did or did not rise from the dead on Easter Day, there is no doubt that the belief that he did rise from the dead was the belief of

those first Christians from the earliest days. The whole of the Christian Church is based on nothing else so strongly as on its belief in the Resurrection of Jesus. The classic text on this foundation belief of Christianity is 1 Corinthians, chapter 15 — much earlier and, almost certainly, historically more accurate than any of the Gospels. Perhaps it could be your reading for Easter Eve.

Easter Day, celebrating the glorious Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, marks the beginning of the fifty days (reckoning inclusively) of Easter, extending up to the Feast of Pentecost (which means ‘fifty’), celebrated this year on Sunday May 31st. The whole of this season is a season of rejoicing and celebration.

Following Easter Day itself we have



two ‘Red Letter’ festivals, that is, festivals of the highest importance. The first is on Thursday April 23rd, the Feast of S George, the Patron Saint of Merrie England. One tradition says that George was a Roman soldier who became a Christian and was martyred in the persecution of Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century, just before the time of Constantine, the first Christian Roman

Emperor. He was a great favourite of the English crusaders of the Middle Ages, who, it is said, brought his cult back to England.

Only two days later, on Saturday, April 25th, we celebrate S Mark, who



is believed to have been the author of the earliest Gospel. Virtually the whole of his Gospel is also to be found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, showing how vitally important his Gospel came to be regarded. It is by far and away the shortest Gospel account and in it the character of Jesus comes over with an extraordinary vigour and sense of urgency — it is striking how often the words ‘immediately’ and ‘straightway’, for example, occur in this writing. Read it afresh and see what impact it makes upon you! Our spiritual reading could form part of our thanksgiving for the continuing celebration at this time of the glorious Resurrection of Jesus.

Fr Andrew

Calendar for April 2020

Date	Feast
1 st Wednesday	Feria
2 nd Thursday	S Francis of Paola, hermit
3 rd Friday	Feria
4 th Saturday	S Isidore B Dr
5th Sunday	Palm Sunday The Parish of Highgate
6 th Monday	Monday of Holy Week
7 th Tuesday	Tuesday of Holy Week
8 th Wednesday	Wednesday of Holy Week
9th Thursday	Maundy Thursday
10th Friday	Good Friday
11th Saturday	Holy Saturday
12th Sunday	Easter Sunday The Parish of Highgate
13 th Monday	Easter Monday
14 th Tuesday	Easter Tuesday
15 th Wednesday	Easter Wednesday
16 th Thursday	Easter Thursday
17 th Friday	Easter Friday
18 th Saturday	Easter Saturday
19th Sunday	The Second Sunday of Easter The Parish of Highgate
20 th Monday	S Beuno, Abbot
21 st Tuesday	S Anselm B Dr
22 nd Wednesday	Feria
23 rd Thursday	S George M
24 th Friday	S Fidelis of Sigmaringen Pr M, and S Mellitus, 1st Bishop of S Paul's, London
25 th Saturday	S Mark, Evangelist
26th Sunday	The Third Sunday of Easter The Parish of Highgate
27 th Monday	Assicus (Tasca) Bishop of Roholpm — a close friend of S Patrick
28 th Tuesday	S Peter Chanel Pr M
29 th Wednesday	S Catherine of Siena V Dr
30 th Thursday	S Pius V, P

Note: The daily Mass readings can be found at: <http://universalis.com/mass.htm>

Supporting Saint Alban's During the Lockdown

The church is now completely closed and only one person at a time may enter the building for essential purposes. Fr Gerry is entering occasionally to check the building, and Amanda Cadman to keep the food bank functioning.

The work on the church roof is now suspended indefinitely, with scaffolding at the level of the aisles and the old tiles stripped from part of the south aisle. The Roof has been left watertight and the site secure.

Fr Gerry has been forbidden to record services for us inside the church, apparently because this might suggest that the church was still open, but he is continuing to record services for us from the vicarage. You can find his recordings on our parish website at <http://www.saintalban.co.uk/videos/services/> and on our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/StAlbanBirmingham>.

The closure of the church is likely to last months rather than weeks. While it continues, those of us who contribute to the costs of the church through weekly planned giving envelopes or by completing Gift Aid envelopes when we visit are unable to do so. Unfortunately, even though the services are cancelled,

most of our bills will continue. We have turned off the heating to save gas, and we will use less electricity, but our monthly contributions to the Diocesan Common Fund, our insurance premium, and more will continue.

It would be very helpful if as many of you as are able to do so, continue to support St Alban's financially during this difficult time by making your donations directly to our bank, either by setting up a standing order or making individual donations through internet banking.

The account details are:

Bank: HSBC

Sort Code: 40-11-17

Account Number: 31004948

Account Name: St Albans PCC

Please use either your name or "Envelope xx" where "xx" is the number on your envelopes as the reference, so that we know against which donations we can claim Gift Aid tax rebates.

Please also remember our church, parish and people in your prayers and:

**Stay Home
Protect the NHS
Save Lives**

*Chris Smith
Churchwarden*



Scaffolding on the north side of the church



Scaffolding over the south aisle



The west end of the church. As with most businesses and projects across the world, work has now been suspended for an unknown period of time.

Back to the Future

Chris found this interesting snippet from S Alban's magazine of nearly one hundred years ago:

S. Alban's Magazine October 1922:

“We must congratulate James Bond on getting a free place at the University. He began at S. Alban's Schools, and is doing splendidly in his career.”

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