

“BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS IF NOT DUFFERS WON'T DROWN”

So read the telegram that started the adventures of the Swallows and Amazons.

On the whole, few parents look at the child they love and say:

‘You have a good day today. Go out and take a few risks.’

We are taught from an early age to be safe. To take care of ourselves and protect each other. As far as is possible to avoid risks. And mostly this is a good thing.

In the gospel reading today, the people surrounding Jesus are trying to protect him, keep him safe.

The Pharisees don't get a particularly good press in the gospels, but here they are warning Jesus. Giving a little friendly advice.

‘Get away from here, Herod wants to kill you.’

But Jesus does not run away. He says he has work to do, healing, teaching, preaching, casting out demons, and all the time working his way towards the source of danger, Jerusalem. Courting danger not just for himself, but for his followers.

Why?

Why not play safe and live to preach and teach and heal another day?

Because his message, embodied in his deeds as well as his words, had to be made public. And the message was, and is, profoundly disturbing, for it is in direct opposition to our human understanding of power.

Rowan Williams wrote a book called ‘Christ on Trial’. At the end of the first chapter he gives some questions for consideration.

One of these is:

‘Is God supposed to make us feel safe?’

This is a radical and fundamental question about the nature of God, and one that therefore deserves our attention.

There is a strand of Christianity that would answer without hesitation 'yes'.

Say a prayer of commitment 'Jesus come into my heart', and you are saved, but more than that you are safe, assured that on Judgement day you will pass the test, but also assured that every need, every prayer will be answered. And certainty surrounds the person like a carapace, an exoskeleton, an impenetrable armour. The world cannot hurt such a person. He or she is safe. Doubts have no foothold, and faith is personal and centred upon the safety of salvation. Evangelism is about bringing others into this safe haven. The only conflict that is evident is that directed against those who are seen as a threat to the continuance of the true faith. Those who might rock the boat, make it less safe.

Yet here is Jesus, heading resolutely towards danger, towards conflict. Filled not with joy, but with sorrow. His passion is not to bring people to a verbal confession of faith, but to a change in their lifestyle that runs counter to the accepted power hierarchies, that acknowledges the essence of humanity that is present in every person, regardless of status or condition.

In Jesus there is no protective armour, but a central core that cannot be destroyed. A resoluteness, an intensity, a passion for justice and love that teaches us the true power of being human, a power that is at worst destroyed, at best hidden, if we collude with the accepted values of society.

Jesus' central core far from being protected, is surrounded by vulnerable and frail flesh. Flesh that can be torn, bloodied, broken.

In church, we sometimes talk about becoming more Christ like. Well, if that is really what we want to do, then we must become vulnerable. Risk getting hurt. Find that central core that is God given and that is the essence of our humanity. And, and this is the challenge, accept conflict. Conflict with wealth. Conflict with violence. Conflict with oppression. Conflict with racism. Conflict with laws that discriminate. Conflict with those who want political power at any price. Conflict with ourselves, our consciences, the values that we have inherited from society and an established church.

So much energy is given by Christians to unimportant issues – I sometimes think the church is obsessed with sex - and yet the really important things get overlooked. But the important things are risky.

Perhaps it is because we cannot imagine telling our children: 'go out and take a few risks today', that we can't imagine our Father in heaven saying it either.

But if we believe that through Christ we can uniquely see the nature of God, then we must think again.

God took risks.

Jesus took risks; more than that, he deliberately walked into the teeth of danger because his message was too important to be sidelined.

And the message was not – 'Worship me and you will be safe'.

The message was 'follow my way, the path that leads to danger, that involves a cross. The way of justice, the way of peace, the way of integrity, the way of love.'

There are many many times when I'm not at all sure if I have the strength or the faith to walk that way. Times when I prefer to retreat into a safe place, when I kid myself that being a Christian is more about putting on the armour of my belief than risking exposing who I am. Times when I think, 'oh if I say that I might upset someone'. But God wants us to take a few risks.

We are walking the path towards Good Friday in our readings. May God give us the courage to walk that path in our lives. Amen.