

Good Friday 2015 – three short talks

Crown of Thorns.

To the Greek the laurel wreath was the much coveted symbol of success, awarded to athletes and to poets. In Rome it symbolised military victory and was presented to successful commanders. But laurel was not the only plant used in decorative wreaths. A soldier who saved the life of another soldier would be awarded an oak wreath – a great honour. Brides and Grooms would wear garlands of fragrant flowers. Priests would wear wreaths at a sacrifice and they were worn at funerals by the wealthy.

Crowns made of plants were used in many contexts and held great symbolism, but no-one used a crown of thorns. There would be no ready-made crowns of thorns lying to hand. Someone took branches and made it, risking tearing their own hands and arms for the success of this joke, this parody of the laurel wreath, of triumph. The intent was to ridicule, to demonstrate the complete failure of Jesus, of the one who was called king but who now had lost everything.

That person who long ago had time enough on his hands to make the crown, who wanted the approbation of his fellows, who had no compassion for any prisoners but instead found them useful sources of amusement, that person could not have known how through the ages the crown of thorns became a more powerful and eternal symbol than any laurel wreath.

Like the now forgotten oak wreath given to those who save the life of another, like the crown given to the bride and bridegroom, it has become the symbol of God's sacrifice for us, of the bridegroom giving all, of humility and suffering and generous love. It demonstrates how God can transform the agent of humiliation and pain into a symbol of hope and promise.

But for us, the question remains, how can one person so mistreat another?

In January I visited Yad Vashem, the holocaust museum in Jerusalem. Some of the most shocking photographs were taken before the war. They were of soldiers standing around smoking, pointing and laughing as they made Jews scrub the pavement with a toothbrush.

Like the Roman soldiers before them, they had consciously or unconsciously turned off all empathy, distanced themselves from fellow human beings. They had turned their back on love, not perhaps on all love, they may have had wives and children at home, but nevertheless, they had turned their back on love.

Yet it is so easy to turn away from love when our prejudice makes us fail to see Christ within another person, fail to see a person at all. So easy to categorise and label and exclude. So easy too to condemn those who point the finger and laugh, without understanding how we might fare, or perhaps have already fared, in similar circumstances.

When a social worker or the police see a troublesome out of control teenager and fail to see the abused vulnerable child, empathy has been turned off. When an employer demands ever longer hours and fails to recognise the pressure it puts on a family, when a government sees the homeless

as an unfortunate problem that is damaging tourism, and fails to care about its causes, empathy is forgotten. When a church cares only about its members and ignores the cries for help from outside its walls, then we are loving selectively, we are inflicting pain. All of us can find ourselves ignoring the pain of others, blaming them for their condition and even poking fun at them.

The Son of Man, man as God intended man to be, perfect in love, gave his life for us. He won the crown of sacrifice and the crown of love and it was a crown that drew his blood, made him an object of fun and ridicule. When we are offered a crown of thorns, we must remember that God can transform this crown into a crown of glory. When we are tempted to offer another a crown of thorns, tempted to ridicule another, we must remember that each and every person is loved by God. When we become brave enough to reach out and take the crown of thorns to prevent it being placed on another's head, then we will truly know love's meaning.

Nails

The churchyard, this time of year, is teeming with life. There are robins and blackbirds, wrens, even a firecrest or two, and, if you look a little closer, there are thousands of insects, flies and beetles, and soon (possibly) butterflies. To sit there on a bench on a sunny day is to feel that life is rich and wonderful and good, and that the events that haunt the front pages of our newspapers are but an aberration.

But we have restlessness; we rarely sit and contemplate. We want to analyse and understand, to tame and control. Nowhere is that more obvious than if you visit an old fashioned natural history museum, a place where the variety of natural life should be celebrated. Most of these have changed radically in the last twenty years, but some still have those chilling trays of insects pinned and labelled. By such methods have we examined these creatures microscopically, learnt much about the way in which they are constructed, but by so doing we have also distanced ourselves from them. All the freedom, the beauty, and wonder of their fragile existence has been lost. All recognition of our co-dependence suppressed. In demonstrating our control and intellect, we have destroyed far more than we realise.

Perhaps that is always true whenever we try to pin something down, whether it be insect, word or idea. When Jesus was nailed to a cross, it was not in order to understand him more, nor to collect another specimen, but it was because he was not understood, he did not fit any obvious category, he was an unknown quantity and therefore dangerous. But the nails that pinned him down, these long sharp shards of metal were intended to ensure that his ideas, his teaching, his preaching could no longer have the freedom to transform and change people's lives.

How wrong they were! There are some ideas, some concepts that can never be contained, that will always fly free.

Unlike the pinned butterfly whose wings gradually become dulled, and will never enjoy the freedom of the air again, the truths that were embodied in Christ were set free by the nails.

But still we try, we try very hard, to pin him down. We have doctrine, sound doctrine necessary to preserve the faith. In ages past good men and women were burnt or worse because their interpretation of the word did not fit the age. To be an Anabaptist in the 16th century, to believe that Christians should share a common purse, was punishable by death. We are still too quick to judge and label actions or beliefs as incompatible with Christianity. And although here it is safe to express different views, that is not true everywhere and may not always remain true here. What will condemn a soul? – is it the little lie, the sneaky speeding in the car, the passing of the ticket from the parking metre to someone else, is it shouting at the children, or the gender of the person one loves, or the way we judge others? Only God knows these things, but we would pin them down and have clear straightforward answers. So although the truths will always fly free, our nails destroy the joy, the joy that comes from open-handed generosity and trust in following Christ.

Let us put aside our nails, our need to classify and understand the detail, and instead enjoy the freedom and the beauty of God's love in Christ and have humility enough to allow God alone to be judge. Let us give Christ the freedom to transform and change our lives.

Dice

The pay was bad, clothing expensive, a new tunic was worth something. There was nothing to lose by rolling the dice, and if the soldier was lucky, there would be a small bonus at the end of another miserable soul destroying day's work. Those soldiers knew all about luck. They would have seen comrades caught for minor transgressions and whipped or if they were really unlucky put in sacks with wild snakes and thrown into the river. They had heard about the fate of those who fled the battle in fear, and how their fellow soldiers were forced to stone or beat them to death. It is possible that they may have had to participate in such a stoning. How often had they thought to themselves, that could have been me?

So much that happens in our lives is down to luck. A second later and we might have been caught in the pile up on the motorway. We were lucky that doctor diagnosed the ectopic pregnancy just in time. The terrorists blew up the restaurant the day after we ate there – weren't we lucky. But we have friends or family members who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, where the accident really did happen, the diagnosis was made too late, where the luck ran out. How many times have we thought to ourselves, that could have been me?

It can feel as though others are rolling dice around us to determine what happens next to us.

But those soldiers, hoping for a piece of good cloth, did not by their actions make any difference to what Jesus suffered or what he achieved. Their gambling did not affect what would happen to him after his death or what happens to us after our death.

And all that we put down to luck, our investments, our health, our safety, none of this affects the really important aspects of our life. It can shorten our life or extend it, it can make it comfortable or painful, but it is how we deal with each and every event, that is what is important. If we are ill, do we feel self pity, or do we reach out to those we know who suffer on our behalf, those who long for us to be well? If we are poor, do we steal or trick others out of their wealth or does it make us more generous to others who have even less than we have? If we have a charmed existence, are we grateful for every minute, or do find little things to complain about?

We have no control over much of what happens to us. But we have total control over how we deal with life, whether to be generous and full of gratitude, or bitter and full of envy, whether to forgive or to bear grudges, whether to enjoy the present moment or to dwell on the past or inhabit a fairy tale future.

Jesus on the cross could have railed against the system, against the soldiers whose job was to crucify him, against the priests who condemned him, against Pilate who washed his hands of him, against Judas, his close friend, who betrayed him. But he didn't. He forgave those who hurt him. He had compassion on those that loved him. He reached out in love to mother and his friend, to those on the cross beside him, to those whose fear had brought him to his death. His thoughts even at the end were not just for himself.

It is not luck that made Jesus who he was. It is not luck or a throw of the dice that makes us who we are.

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