

April 1 2010: Maundy Thursday

Readings: Exodus 12.1-4, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26; John 13.1-17, 31b-35

Today I was asked to give a reflection at lunchtime at St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. The reflection was a response to a monumental four metre cross they have hanging there during Holy Week called 'Victim, no resurrection'. The cross is like a window into human suffering, by an artist called Terry Duffy.

Earlier in the week as I prepared the reflection I spent a long time in front of this cross, just looking at it. It seemed to me as I looked at it, that what this cross articulated, was not salvation but a very raw scream – a scream welling up from the guts of pain and suffering.

The head of the figure shakes in chaos. The left hand is flayed open as though fanning the panic, the right hand frail as though starved of nourishment. In the midst of the image, a knot of agony: dark, bruised, cut, defaced, bleeding, a vulnerable body – exposed, defaced, tangled, running. I was reminded of the painting by Picasso, 'Guernica', which Picasso painted in response to the devastation of Guernica in Spain after a three hour German bombing raid in 1937. The poet R.S. Thomas describes it thus: 'The painter has gone down to the root of the scream and surfaced again to prepare the affections for the atrocity of its flowers.'

In this image of the cross there was no resolution, rather the chaos of human fear. The crucifixion is not locked in the past but very present tense for our twenty first century. Looking into this cross was like a window. I am reminded of the victims of torture, today; the victims of natural disaster, the refugee, the asylum seeker – struggling, alienated, confronting; homeless people longing for change. I was reminded of the lonely, the broken, the struggling, the elderly fighting old age, my father incapacitated, my friend dying with cancer. I was reminded of my own deepest fears.

So often we want to make the story safe, to give it reconciliation before the horror overpowers us. I was confronted by the title of the painting: 'Victim, no resurrection'. It disturbed and unsettled me, as well it might. There is something profoundly disturbing about a victim without hope. Who wants to acknowledge that? It is ugly. It is frightening. We turn away. "No Lord, I will never betray you – even if others forget you and fall away, I will never betray you." "No, this cannot happen to you." "What are you talking about?" the disciples ask Jesus.

So what do we do? We try to make the narrative safe – to turn the horror of this death into an episode on the way to happy ever after, where Good Friday will soon lead us into Easter eggs and new life and fresh flowers.

Today it struck me that Jesus did not know this narrative and neither did his disciples. Certainly he may have glimpsed a beyond – but not for sure.

Tonight begins a journey into darkness – a journey made more fearful because, if we open our eyes, we realise this journey into darkness is the experience of many and can be our own journey too. It is the journey of faith, where the future is not known.

I think of my mother on the phone, pouring out her anxieties of old age. I think of my terminally ill friend facing only further illness. I think of the anger of a homeless person telling me of the injustice he is facing, and what am I going to do about it? Powerless. And I

know, know deeply that all of us at some stage in our lives must make that journey into darkness, that journey into the unknown.

Christ is in that very position on the night he is betrayed. And tonight we have come once more to look to him. He is about to make that journey we most fear, to 'the root of the scream'. What does he show to us? What does he leave with us which can help us? Why have we chosen to remember this?

The first thing that strikes me is that Jesus is not simply going to leave us with platitudes, and words. He is going to leave us with actions – sacraments, visible signs, to help us in the darkness.

The first thing we are told is that he had always loved his disciples in this world, and he loved them until the *end*. The reason we have gathered tonight is that this is not past tense; this is *now*. We too have gathered here as Christ's disciples and we are told, he loves us until the end. To show that love Jesus performs an action. It was awkward *then* for the disciples; it is awkward *now*. It disorientates us, makes us uncomfortable, feel embarrassed and unworthy. "Not my feet. Choose someone else's." Our leader, the one we respect, admire, love, look to, give authority – strips off his outer garments and wants to wash our feet. There is an impulse to resist this. "I don't want my feet washed. I don't want this reversal of roles. I want my God to control things, not to serve me, not to depend on me." "I have given you an example," he says, "and you must also do what I have done to you." In the face of his own death, Jesus' action is not one of obvious defiance but profound humility. Quite the opposite of self-defence, he responds to his impending betrayal and attack with an action of complete self-giving – an action so contrary to self-preservation that it disturbs us, disorientates us, perhaps makes us cry out with Peter, "Are you going to wash my feet too?" He even responds to his betrayer with love.

The next actions that we will remember tonight are also startling, disorientating, hard to explain. Jesus will take bread in his hands and say to us: "This is my body, given to you," take wine and say "this is my blood, shed for a new relationship between humanity and God – my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins." One of those in the Lent study group, reflecting on those words last Monday, responded directly to those words: "I don't like this. I don't feel comfortable with the language. What does he mean his body and blood?" In a very direct and radical way Jesus is giving himself to you, body and spirit, as we enter the darkness. I cannot say these words at the altar without sensing that they reach to the deepest part of all of me and all of us. I cannot explain these actions, I don't think any sacramental theology ever really can explain and define them or make them safe. And yet these actions *do* speak to us. Speak to us at the deepest level of our personhood. We must dare to live them. This is God's love given to you. This is God's life given into your life. This is the visible sign of the truth that will lead you through the darkness.

Perhaps at moments, we, like those first disciples, will lose sight of all of this. We will be swept up into doubt and confusion, but return again and again to these signs – even with trembling. This is the height, the depth, the breadth of God's love. Nothing will separate you from that love. On the one hand, this seems to be the most vulnerable thing, the most exposed thing to be offered, and yet it is also the most precious gift in all the world and the one we are called to share.

This is where resurrection begins. Begins in darkness. Begins in fear. Begins in doubt. Begins in the offering of a love seemingly so powerless.
"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you."