

# Sunday 11 April: Second Sunday of Easter

## Hope

**Readings: Acts 5.27-32; John 20.19-end**

Just before Holy Week I was offered the chance to go and see and hear an opera at the Coliseum called "Satyagraha" by Philip Glass. After a busy week I almost didn't go. The music I was told is like a tonal repetitive poem. It's over three and a quarter hours long. I was worried I would fall asleep. But as is often the way, when you are least expecting it, you are swept away into something which is transformative and unforgettable: so special that you long to hold onto the experience and repeat it and live it long after you have left. Yes, the music was repetitive but repetitive and life giving in the way a heart's beat is repetitive, repetitive like breathing in and breathing out, repetitive like waves of the sea smoothing pebbles and shaping drift wood. It was music and images that seemed to enter into your very blood stream so that you were breathing it, growing with it, like a prayer or meditation entering your whole body and shaping the contours of your inner landscape. It was hauntingly beautiful.

Later, I played a part of the music to one of my friends.

"What word comes to your mind," I asked, "when you listen to this?"

"Hope," he said.

"Yes," I replied, "that's what I experienced too."

Satyagraha is a word invented by Mahatma Gandhi. This opera is a reflection upon Gandhi's life and his non violent struggle against injustice. The word satyagraha is a synthesis of two words - satya means truth, truth founded in love, and the word agraha means firmness, insistence and force. Satyagraha therefore means a force and a power born in truth and love. It was the word Gandhi used for non violent resistance to bring about change - it was what he called "love force - soul force." It is very close to the Spirit of our Christian Gospel though sadly not lived often enough.

In the programme notes for the opera there is an interesting article by Mark Kurlansky on Gandhi's philosophy of satyagraha or non-violence. He points out that the concept of non violence has been praised by every major religion, and throughout history there have been practitioners of non-violence but while every language has a word for violence there is no single word to express the concept of non-violence apart from saying what it is not: non violence, non harm.

Mark Kurlansky suggests that the possible explanation for this is that while violence is a key component of our lives and the lives of any society - non violence is considered a marginal point of view, a fanciful rejection of the violence and force which is such a mainstay of human experience - so that its opposite is not given credence in its own right. In fact it is so contrary to a society's use of violence that it is often seen as something threatening or subversive: witness to the lives of martyrs who were put to death **not** because they were violent but because of their active opposition to violence. The deaths of modern martyrs like Oscar Romero in 1980, the demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1986, the Melanesian Brotherhood peacemakers in 2003, the Buddhist Monks in Burma in 2008 - witness to the fact that non violence threatens the authority of the violent. The same of course was **most** true of Jesus Christ the peacemaker who was crucified.

This non violence has a very different connotation from pacifism. Pacifism is a state of mind which rejects violence. It has a passive quality in its refusal to respond aggressively. In

Gandhi's word Satyagraha, non violence is ACTIVE. It is a force, a life force - a very powerful force for truth. This force for good does not avoid the violent, neither does it coerce or simply obstruct. This force of love and truth converts. When Jesus said that we should turn the other cheek we could say that he was taking a pacifist position by refusing to respond to violence with violence. But when Christ says we must love our enemies what he was preaching was non violence, Satyagraha an active force for love and truth. His refusal to attack those who arrested him could be seen as pacifism but his willingness to preach and live his message publicly at the heart of Jerusalem, and to take upon himself all the violence of those who opposed him without being poisoned by that violence himself, that is when truth and love become most powerful. His death was not the end, how could it be? Such love force rises again even when they think they have snuffed it out.

Martin Luther King was greatly influenced by Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha. He wrote: "As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my scepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished". King began to see the potency of that love, revealed in the life of Christ as the means to non violent radical social transformation.

*"I believe," Martin Luther King wrote "that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant. I believe that even amidst today's mortar bursts and whining bullets there is still hope. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood flowing streets of our nations can be lifted to reign supreme among the children of men."*

Witness our Gospel for today. Jesus' group of disciples are traumatised and oppressed by the violence they have witnessed. The text portrays a community of fear, failure and betrayal hiding behind locked doors because they are terrified the violence which has been done to Jesus will be done to them. It is into this room that the risen Christ bursts. It is into this tomb he comes announcing the courage of peace. Peace his first words after the agony of the cross - not judgement or retribution but PEACE the power of peace a grace greater than all the violence used against him. He shows those disciples the signs of violence - the holes in his hands and his side. But now these wounds have been transformed, yes they are the signs of the torture and brutality done to him they have now also become signs that he is alive. Those wounds have become the signs of the resurrection. And they have also become signs of his love for us. Resurrection is a repudiation of all the violence that has been used against him.

Again and again this story has come to me when I have met with people who have been deeply wounded by others and by life. This is especially true of asylum seekers and migrants many of whom have suffered most terribly, both the violence and brutality that has led them to flee their homes, but also the violence of betrayal, suspicion and hatred, that has led them to feel like outcasts. This sense of shame and betrayal is true of so many people who have lived lives where tragedy, violence and fear have robbed them of self esteem. As we know violence is all too common within the homes in this country fed by a diet of vicious DVDs and computer games, cruelty and dysfunctional relationships. And how much lasting peace has a war on terror achieved? How many have been converted by violence? Victor Frankl who chronicled his experiences as a Jew and prisoner in a Concentration camp during the Second World War wrote of the three psychological reactions experienced to some extent by all those who were the victims of violence.

1. An overwhelming sense of shock and trauma and inability to come to terms with the fear or the horror.
2. A sense of apathy and despair, that nothing can be done and nothing will ever change.
3. Lastly and often later - reactions of depersonalisation and moral deformity, hatred, bitterness, disillusionment, blame and an inability to relate or trust in humanity again.

Yet Victor Frankl in his book 'Man's Search for Meaning' wrote:

*'We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they are sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing, the last of the human freedoms-to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way of responding.'*

He writes,

*'When we are unable to change a situation-just think of an incurable disease or inoperable cancer-we are challenged to change ourselves.'*

*'Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of himself mentally or spiritually. A man or woman may retain their human dignity even in a concentration camp.'*

He writes,

*We discover the meaning in life in three different ways*

- 1. by creating a work or doing a deed for good*
- 2. by experiencing something or encountering someone*
- 3. by the attitude that we adopt towards unavoidable suffering.*

Christ bursts into that locked room calls his disciples from fear into the Action of PEACE.

He sends them out from that locked room. They are not coerced into action, they are converted by the signs of his love for them. WE do not forgive and forget. If we forgive it is by painfully remembering and choosing where we wish to stand. All of us carry wounds: wounds of our own sinfulness, wounds of the suffering, and the sins and rejection of others that have been inflicted upon us. They can become wounds of bitterness and resentment but they can also become the wounds which are signs of transfiguration and change - the wounds of our conversion - Christ sends out his disciples, commissions each one of us, breathes into us that Spirit for love and for truth - to live it in word and action in the simple daily choices of our lives in our homes and also in the life of our nation.

It is a hard leap of faith perhaps we will never know its possibility until the moment we face, like Thomas, our greatest doubt. Yet it is the ultimate meaning of what it means to believe in Jesus Christ and the resurrection. For this resurrection is the victory of love over hatred, of communion over betrayal, and of God's hope over our continual temptation to doubt and despair. "Peace be with you, as the Father sent me so I send you"

Let us end this reflection by listening to the end of Philip Glass opera Satyagraha in which Gandhi sings a haunting song like a mantra of hope. Yearning for each one of us to become a force for truth and a force for love. The words in Sanskrit are these:

Take visible shape

Move humanity with humanity for the protection of good

Thrust back the evil of violence

And set virtue on her seat again

What word comes to your mind? "Hope"

Yes, that's it, the Easter hope.