

Sunday 19 April 2009: Second Sunday of Easter

Signs of Resurrection

Readings: Acts 4.32-35; John 20.19-end

This last week the Hillsborough tragedy has been remembered in which 96 Liverpool football fans were crushed to death on the caged terraces 20 years ago. In a Radio 4 programme 'The Reunion' a group of those whose lives were torn apart by that terrible tragedy recounted their stories. One mother described how she had arrived for the game with her husband and two daughters in the back of the car; how the journey there in the morning had been full of laughter and excitement. That same day after the tragedy they had driven home with the back seats empty – both of their daughters had died in the crush. She described running up the stairs to their bedrooms as if she was hoping to find them there, even though she knew they had died, and seeing their beds as they had left them in the morning. She described going into the garden and cutting tulips at 3am in the morning; red and yellow – which her daughters had planted, the colours of Liverpool. Another mother described her son James leaving the house in the morning telling her he would go to Mass on Sunday because he would be late home from the football. Then she described how during the afternoon she had become aware of the tragedy breaking on the TV. She described waiting for every football supporters' coach to return growing increasingly desperate and then the last coach arriving, everyone getting out and still no sign of her son. Her husband set off by car to try and find him promising that he would phone each half hour to let her know if there was any news and then after the first few phone calls the phone calls stopped. And then two hours later she saw her husband with her sister walking slowly down the street towards her and she turned and ran away because she knew why they were there and didn't want to hear the news they were bringing.

Twenty years on and the sense of tragedy had not diminished – the rawness of their memories which have lived with them constantly. In such tragedy we are struck by the irreversibility of the loss to which there seems to be no answer at all. What once was can never be the same again. The future seems to close down. There are moments in all our lives when to speak of hope or new life seems almost an insult or to trivialise the depth of suffering. Church leaders who speak of learning from suffering seem to speak from the luxury of the lifeboat to those whose experience is often one of drowning in memories and regrets.

W.H. Auden in his famous poem captures the havoc that the loss of a loved one causes:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dogs from barking...

He was my North my South my East my West
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever but I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put them out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

As those first disciples gather behind locked doors this too must be their experience of the death of Jesus. The man they have loved, believed in and followed is dead. We can

sometimes take comfort in a death which has been a peaceful parting – but these disciples know that the one they loved died in agony after being tortured, insulted and abandoned. Perhaps worse still for them is the fear that they are culpable, in some way implicated in his death because of their own betrayal and failure to prevent the tragedy. Again and again I have noticed how grief has this quality of fear debilitating us, turning us in on ourselves, shutting down the future. This is life behind locked doors.

It is at this point our Gospel tells us in such a simple and direct way “Jesus came and stood among them and said ‘Peace be with you.’” In one line everything is reversed – death is swept away. Yet it is precisely here that our Gospel seems to part company from our own experience of death. Yes, sometimes those we are searching for are miraculously pulled from the rubble of an earthquake. But when someone is dead they do not come miraculously back to life except in our dreams. It seems in our Gospel story those disciples are given a chance that in real life we are denied. The grief we encounter lasts a lot longer than three days – it goes on and on and it leaves a space and that space remains a space.

So is resurrection simply a false dream, a hope against hope, not the bitter experience of our own tragedies and pain? I think that grief can be like a wound, like an open grave and it actually ultimately demands a choice in our lives. And the choice, very simply, is this: will this grave be the place where all life ends or where life begins?

Jesus’ words to his disciples are so crucial. His first words to them are “Peace be with you.” Perhaps we may rebel against that word. How can there possibly be peace when we are in the turmoil of pain and loss? It is like telling the drowning man, flailing the air above the water and gasping for oxygen, to relax. It is contrary to the whole panic of loss. And yet that peace is the only way to life. Straight after his words of peace Jesus says “As the father has sent me so I send you.” Again we may react with astonishment, how can we possibly be sent out to others when we are still overwhelmed by our own woundedness? Yet, again and again we witness that our pain can only be only healed by acts of love and compassion. And now Christ breathes into them. It is like the kiss of life. Our life at this moment which seems like drowning will depend on him – his life of love breathed into us. This is a spirit we never believed we had because it does not come from us, it comes from God. It is a breath providing life even amidst the waves that buffet us. In Gabriel Marcel’s words “deep down in me there is something other than me, something further within me than I am myself.”

Now Jesus says these words to his disciples “If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained.” I had always read these words to mean he is conferring upon them some kind of apostolic authority – in other words Christ giving his disciples authority to forgive or not to forgive thus becoming the ones who have the right to judge others. But as I read these words now they hold a very different truth. They are saying that we are given by the risen Christ the power to forgive ourselves and others: an incredible liberating gift of life. But the opposite of that is to go on holding on to the sin and the guilt, retaining it, retaining sin, and living in the darkness of that retention. All true forgiveness awakens the depths of the human heart, those depths that are made for goodness and long for goodness.

Now John’s Gospel brilliantly represents our doubt through the character of Thomas. Thomas, who has not been confronted by the risen Christ, thinks quite rationally that it is all nonsense, fantasy. The Christ he grieves for was wounded in the hands and feet by real nails, was killed on a cross – had a spear thrust his side; how can these ghost stories change anything?

And then Christ appears to him too, calling him to put his hands in those wounds to witness for himself that the wounds of his death can be transformed into the signs of resurrection. Those wounds cannot be removed but they can be transformed. The vacated space can become the space of God's presence and new life. It is perhaps a truth too simple to notice that after the agony of crucifixion and death, while Christ points to the wounds it is not to accuse them of the past but to liberate their future. There is no blame. This week I was asked by a bright young man from Afghanistan searching to understand the Christian faith – "what is the difference between good and bad religion?" I said "Beware of religion that teaches you to hate." Christ's emphasis is always on goodness. Paul Ricoeur said that he saw the meaning of religion was "to liberate the depths of goodness in people, to go looking for it when it is completely buried." Brother Roger of Taizé put it even more simply: "Choose to love."

Twenty years on from Hillsborough James's mother said "there is not a day goes by when I do not think of James or miss him", but she said "I have two grandchildren now who I love dearly and that has taken away the pain." I can imagine that she is the most wonderful grandmother.

Last night I heard the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela play at the Royal Festival Hall. If you want an experience of resurrection listen to this orchestra of more than a hundred and eighty young people, many of them poor kids from the barrios, playing with such joy passion and fire. The orchestra draws from El Sistema, a musical education programme whereby some quarter of a million children in Venezuela have an opportunity to play in orchestras beginning as young as five years old. Three quarters of these children are beneath the poverty line. The founder and inspiration behind this musical programme is Jose Antonio Abreu. Abreu says "For the children we work with music is often the only way to a dignified, social destiny. Poverty means loneliness, sadness, anonymity. An orchestra means joy, motivation, teamwork, life, and the aspiration to the success of the community. The members talk about finding friendship and meaning in their lives. You can see it and hear it! They are empowered by one another and their combined creativity. How close the philosophy of this orchestra is to those original Gospel values we heard in the reading from Acts: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one claimed private ownership...with great power they gave their testimony to the resurrection." This orchestra, breathes together, rejoices, converts. It has a freedom and a life which is breathtaking and had the whole auditorium on its feet for a standing ovation we thought would never end. There is a spirit born in adversity which is insurmountable, there is light which shines in the darkness that the darkness has never put out.