

Sunday 7 May 2006: The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Through the nature of humanity

Readings: Acts 4: 5-12; John 10:11-18

A couple of times a year, I meet up with a group of friends from theological college. We meet for about 48 hours and our time together is a mix of spiritual and social – one of the group sometimes reminding us that the most important part of any retreat is the “treat” bit. I guess we’re a reasonably disciplined lot but sometimes to give our time together some structure we take a theme. Last summer we used the “I am” sayings in John’s gospel as the theme with one of us leading a meditation on one of those sayings when we met for Morning and Evening prayer and to celebrate the Eucharist. On the first full day of our meeting I was up fairly early and spent some time reading the papers which had just been delivered. It was July, less than a week after the bombings that had rocked the life of this city and the identities of the four suicide bombers was just beginning to emerge. The papers that morning were full of speculation as to what had driven four, on the face of it, “ordinary” young men to choose to travel to their deaths with such devastatingly destructive consequences. Minutes later, we gathered for morning prayer, to hear a meditation on “I am the good shepherd” and I found myself reading the words we’ve just heard:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

It was one of those juxtapositions that made me reel inwardly – and stayed with me and left me full of unanswered and probably unanswerable questions in the months since. It’s stayed with me in the encounters with death that I’ve had in that time – perhaps most profoundly a couple of months ago in the final week of my mother’s life when I found myself caught up in that peculiarly painful mix of privilege and powerlessness that comes in watching with the dying. In the long hours of darkness, when most of the time I didn’t know what to hope for let alone pray for, I struggled with the certainty and the “being-in-control” which Jesus’ words seem to convey. For it seems to me in the deaths of those whom we love, the only certainty is of loss of control, of having no power to lay anything down or to take it up again. And it seems to be also, then any attempt to begin to find control or certainty in death, as did the bombers of July 7, is treading a dangerous road which can only lead to the diminishing of our individual and common humanity.

I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again, says Jesus.

Most of the time, I have a love affair with John’s gospel. I love its soaring cosmic visions, its tantalising layers of meaning, its infinite capacity to reveal something unexpected in the supposedly familiar. But there are times in the church year, as well as particular personal circumstances when I find the confidence and apparent serenity with which Jesus moves through its pages hard to take. In Holy Week, for example, it’s not the words of John’s gospel to which I naturally turn to find something to resonate with where I am - though my clergy colleagues might tell you that in Holy Week, I seem to find words of any kind superfluous!

And yet I’m only too aware of the paradox that John’s soaring cosmic visions and the sure confidence of the one who can and does say “I am” comes from an all too real and painful experience of death. I know that the post-resurrection eyes which can see the cross as the

ultimate revelation of divine glory, also witnessed that same death in all its agony and loneliness and desolation. And that the two are different expressions of the same truth - and somewhere in those different expression is what we call "Gospel" - good news - for John and for us, for all humanity.

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.

If grasping at certainty in death feels like a sure way to lose our humanity, then how does the authority and confidence of Jesus' words relate to the real human death which he suffered? How does it relate to the loss which is an all-too-real part of human relationships and which, some days at least, resurrection faith does nothing to diminish? What is the Gospel - the Good News - of which this authority and confidence speaks?

A Jewish blessing reads:

"Blessed are You, our living God, sovereign of the universe, who formed humankind in the image of God, to be like God, to imitate God and to resemble God, and who designed through the nature of humanity the possibility of eternity".

"...through the nature of our humanity the possibility of eternity"

The words of that blessing actually refer to the new creation embodied in marriage - but when I read them recently, they spoke to me of resurrection in a way which illuminates those puzzling words of Jesus about having power to and choosing to lay down his life and to take it up again. Perhaps it's no coincidence that a Jewish wedding blessing speaks to me of resurrection given that John begins and ends his Good News with the glorious imagery of marriage feasts which happened on the third day.

So how do the words of that blessing illuminate Jesus' own words? Well, they tell me that Jesus chooses out of himself - out of the power that lies in the relationships of love at the heart of God - to lay down his life. Struggling to look with post-resurrection eyes, I think I can understand those words of Jesus as an embracing of our humanity rather than a grasping at divinity. In letting go of his divinity Jesus takes on the full nature of humanity - including human death. The choice he makes is not about grasping at the moment or the manner of death in a way which diminishes our human nature. The choice he makes is about accepting human nature in its completeness and its limitations - including the ultimate limitation of death itself - in a way which opens the possibility of eternity..

"Blessed are You, our living God, who designed through the nature of humanity the possibility of eternity".

Through the limitation of human death comes the possibility of eternity through resurrection. Through the ultimate powerlessness of accepting death comes the power to destroy the destructive consequences of death itself - of death's capacity to make us less than human. The good news is that the door to resurrection comes through God's embracing of our humanity rather than through the rejection or destruction of it.

I'm not sure I've found any answers to those seemingly unanswerable questions that July morning left me with. I'm not sure I'm begun to get my head round the truths that hold together the cosmic images Christ's glory and the desolation of his lonely and painful death.

I'm not sure about any of that - but I think I'm sure, even if I can't always see it, of the capacity of the good news of resurrection to speak to me in my humanity - to speak to me in my sorrows as well as my joys - and to hold open to me, to us through the fullness of our human nature in life and in death, the possibility of eternity.