

FROM MISPERCEPTION TO ACCEPTANCE AND HEALING

**Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
14 May 2017**

You might have seen last week Bury St Edmunds was in the national news. St Edmund under the tennis courts in the Abbey Gardens is a popular urban myth in these parts. In the blink of an eye it was in the national papers and even on the ITN News at 10.00. "Experts are set to start digging for another missing English king" claimed one article. Don't believe everything you read! Last week's coverage of St Edmund was essentially fake news. There is no plan for a dig. The Council would like to move the tennis courts because they are in a poor state of repair. But that isn't about to happen. St Edmund under the tennis courts is speculation. A fun idea, but it's only because the tennis courts are there and draw the eye.

What an extraordinary creature the media is. It's easy to roll our eyes at the bizarre stories, the incomplete facts, the provocative headlines. But the media is generated by people. And, like you and me, those people have a limited view, they overreact to events before knowing the whole picture, they respond to what they hear from their point of view and with their assumptions.

Misperception is a regular occurrence for us. This week a man phoned the Cathedral Office. His wife had given him the number to call Glasswells about their furniture delivery. It was the wrong number. Maddie in the Cathedral Office politely asked if he really wanted to talk to the Cathedral about his furniture delivery. But he was insistent – he knew why he was calling and what for. Maddie endured this misplaced certainty for 15 minutes before he finally accepted reality.

Don't forget we do the same. The other day I was convinced that my iPad had run out of battery because my children had been using it. I was not impressed – it's happened before. But after a bit I remembered that in fact I had left it on all day.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus responds to the disciples' misperceptions. In John's account, first Thomas and then Philip ask a question that shows they haven't yet grasped who Jesus is. Remember that in John's Gospel, Jesus and God are one. "I am in the Father and the Father is in me." ¹ "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." ² John's goal is to make this clear. So he has Thomas and Philip asking questions that lead to Jesus clarifying things and correcting their misperception. It is so we the readers get the point too. Like the disciples, we are slow to realise and accept the significance of who Jesus is.

Much of our misperception about ourselves, about other people, about life and about God causes us pain. This includes the belief that we shouldn't experience pain and suffering – and if it comes our way that is unfair. We can be like the mother in this story.

There was once a mother of a young son who was the sunshine of her day. Tragically, he had hardly grown big enough to run and play when he died. The mother's sorrow was so great that she would not accept his death. She took to the streets, carrying the dead son on her hip. She went from house to house asking for medicine for her son. People thought she was mad and tried to tell her there is no medicine.

¹ John 14.11

² John 1.1

But a wise old woman in the monastery above the town understood the mother's sorrow. When she came knocking on the monastery door, her dead son on her hip, asking for medicine, the wise woman said "This is what you must do. You must go to each house in the town and fetch tiny grains of mustard seed. But not just any house will do. You must take mustards seeds only from those houses in which no one has ever died." The mother was delighted at the thought that there was medicine for her son so off she went back to the town. At the first house she knocked and asked for tiny grains of mustard seed. When the people brought her some she added "Tell me, is this a house in which no one has died?" "Oh no," the people said, "the dead from this house are beyond counting." "Then I must go elsewhere" the mother declared.

On she went from house to house, but always the same answer. In the whole town there was no house that death had not touched. And at last she understood why she had been sent on this hopeless mission. She walked out of the town, her son on her hip, to the cemetery and there she gave him up.

Returning to the monastery, she was greeted by the wise old woman who smiled gently and asked "did you fetch the tiny grains of mustard seed from the house without death, as I told you?" The mother answered "Most holy one, there are no houses where death and suffering are not known. All people are touched by death and loss. My own dear son is dead. I see now that whoever is born must die. There is no medicine for this but accepting it. There is no cure, but knowing. Thank you." And she returned to her home.³

Next month a new Service begins here the Cathedral – a monthly Service of Wholeness and Healing. Healing is central to our faith as Christians. The journey of faith is a journey of healing, as we grow in faith and learn to trust God and release our grip on our lives. As we accept more deeply our need for God's grace and that we are held by God in a reality much greater than our narrow perceptions.

To spell it out for a moment, I'm not talking about miraculous physical healing. Physical healing may come our way, but I'm talking about emotional and spiritual healing - and the much bigger picture of inner transformation, personal growth, healing of relationships, growing in unity with God, becoming like Christ. A Service of Wholeness and Healing is for our aches and pains, yes. It's also for our deeper aches and pains - the deep, usually hidden experiences that have shaped us through our lives; the formative experiences that affect and warp our perception. Healing and Wholeness is a channel for the grace to experience reality as it is. Part of that is the grace to accept that we are frail and mortal, grace to accept that suffering is an inevitable part of our experience.

If you come to a Service of Healing and Wholeness you could ask yourself "what hurts the most?" What hurts the most might be physical, it might be emotional, or spiritual; it might be fears, loss, disappointment, resentment; it might be worries about someone you love. Jesus says "come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest".⁴ Remember how in this Easter season we celebrate that whilst suffering and death are real, they do not have the last word.

At the beginning of this morning's Gospel Jesus says "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." We can trust in God whatever comes our way. Much of this is about accepting, accepting reality as it is, rather than our perception. Accepting the

³ Adapted from *A Tale from The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* in "Spiritual Formation – Following the Movements of the Spirit" by Henri Nouwen with Michel J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird p.37-39

⁴ Matthew 11.28

uncertainty and suffering. Accepting and trusting even when we don't know what's going on or where it will lead. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

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