

THE WAY OF LESS SELF AND SUFFERING

Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
3 September 2017

It's nice to see you, to see you nice! Picture the cartoon: Sir Bruce Forsyth at the gates of Heaven with the Angel saying "it's nice to see you..." Mortality has caught up even with Sir Bruce - the great entertainer who defied his age for years. We are regularly reminded of our frailty. Here at the Cathedral we have had too many reminders recently: with the deaths of dear people and others learning of terminal illness. These shocks coming while other precious people in our community are living with degenerative disease or illness which they won't recover from.

"Our tragedy is not that we suffer, but that we waste our suffering. We waste the opportunity of growing into compassion." These words were quoted by a woman called Mary, a mother of four children. The birth of her second son was a shattering experience. He had Hhler's Syndrome – the rare disfiguring and disabling disease known as Gargoylism. Some time later Mary was a volunteer at the home in Suffolk established by Leonard Cheshire and Sue Ryder: Cavendish, a Home for Concentration Camp Survivors. It was her volunteering and involvement in the life of the home that transformed her life. She came across Holocaust survivors who could still laugh. Pain can be destructive, but, she discovered, creative, too. She became aware of the impregnable fortress she had built around herself to shield herself from pain and suffering. She was able to let it be dismantled. Mary wrote "The survivors showed me another possibility that one could live with pain precisely by not fighting it; by not denying its existence, by taking it into oneself, seeing it for what it is, using it, going beyond it. Precisely how I could not yet see; but I knew it could be done. If men could laugh after Auschwitz, then surely there was hope."

When Mary's fourth child was born with Down's Syndrome, Mary hit another wall of despair. She came across the words of the Lebanese poet, Khalil Gibran, "Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain." Amazingly, Mary came to see Nicky's Down Syndrome as a second opportunity for her hard shell of resistance to pain to be smashed open. "I was left feeling vulnerable," she wrote, "and when one is vulnerable, one has the humility to learn."¹

Like Mary, we are all on the journey that Jesus describes in this morning's Gospel. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."² Suffering is part of life. Suffering in its many forms is part of our everyday experience. Then sooner or later serious pain or illness comes our way as well. Jesus shows us the path through suffering into new life. He chose the road to Jerusalem that led to Good Friday and then to Easter Day.

Often we hear "deny yourself and take up your cross" as oppressive, as if it's some negative life-draining command to give up what we enjoy and have a miserable time. In fact Jesus teaching is life-giving! Jesus is saying "embrace your suffering and find life through it." Jesus says "let go of the self that tries to protect itself, that needs to be in control". Like Mary allowing the impregnable fortress she had built around herself to be dismantled and to be open to pain and suffering.

¹ See Craig, M. (1979) *Blessings*, London : Hodder and Stoughton.

² Matthew 16.24-25

Often our sense of self makes our suffering worse. Some mornings I wake up feeling at odds with myself and the world. I compound that discomfort by thinking it shouldn't be that way – rather than accepting the discomfort and remembering that chances are I'll be feeling differently soon enough after some fresh air or a coffee. Some days I expect other people to behave just as I want them to, to agree with my suggestions calmly and sensibly – forgetting that we are all complex, fallible, mysterious beings and maybe they're having a tough day.

This sense of self is a major spiritual issue for our age. So much in our culture feeds an unreal sense of self: independent, entitled to every pleasure and entertainment, free to express my view without responsibility, a sense of self that is the centre of the universe, a self absorbed with itself. The spiritual journey is hard enough without all the consumption, diversion and distraction available to us. Jesus invites us to let go of this illusory self, let go of the self that needs to be in control, the self that needs to be right, the self that needs to be feel significant. Jesus invites us to embrace the deeper reality of uncertainty and vulnerability, the deeper self that is less clearly defined within the great reality of all things, the deeper way of trust and humility within the greater reality of God.

This deeper self is something we can experience, as well as think about. Being by the sea is one way of experiencing it. My summer holiday this year was two weeks by the sea in Cornwall. It was wonderful. I can spend hours watching the ever-changing sea and the tireless tide. The enormity and expanse put day to day issues in perspective. The great reality of the sea puts my sense of self in perspective.

Make no mistake: the way of less self and embracing our suffering is not an easy path. It's no wonder so many people resist it, if they even know it exists. Poor Peter is the fall guy in the Gospel with his mind on human things not on divine things. We, like Peter, so often do the same.

It's not an easy path, but part of uncertainty and humility is not worrying how much progress we are making; part of letting go of self is trusting that God is holding us and leading us. The discomfort makes us want to turn away, but there is peace and strength to be found if we persevere; the kinder and wiser side of ourselves will flourish.

And we are not alone. As James said so powerfully last week talking about St Paul's image of the body. We are members of one another, united like the different parts of a body. The wonderful reading from Romans this morning continues that guidance.³ It teaches us how we can help each other let go of the self and embrace our suffering. When there are things to celebrate, rejoice with each other. When there is pain, share each other's burdens and weep with each other. When you feel like criticising: "bless and do not curse." When you are feeling full of yourself: "Do not be haughty ... do not claim to be wiser than you are." When someone disagrees with you don't react emotionally and lose control: their different view may open a new vision for you. When your feelings are hurt and you want revenge, remain calm and look more deeply: the person who hurt you is suffering too.

Jesus invites us to fullness of life. "If you want to be my friends," he says, "you must put your security at risk, look death in the face, and stick close to me. Those who risk their lives will end up with a better life than they ever dreamed of."

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³ Romans 12.9-21