

The Holy Cross

In my life I seem to have had quite a few near death experiences! The latest happened three weeks ago when I was on holiday in the South Pacific. Even as it was happening I was thinking to myself ‘if I live through I can at least use it in a sermon’ – so here goes!

I was on a very old cargo ship *the Compass Rose*, travelling between the islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita together with about 120 other passengers. I was asleep on a rush mat on the very rusty roof of the ship, lying there under the stars. It was 4.00am in the morning and I was very much at peace with the world. Then someone woke me up:

“Father! Father, sorry to tell you but we are in very serious danger at this time. Our boat is full up with water. We are sinking will you come and pray for us!”

As you can imagine, I was very quickly awake. I rushed down the ladder towards the hold. The generator was cutting in and out and the lights were going on and off. But in the half light I could see that the whole of the hold was like a swimming pool under at least six feet of water. More accurately it was like a great soup because the cargo of noodles and rice had broken open and was swelling and had blocked the pump which had now broken down. A young passenger was diving into the filth to try and clean out all that was clogging it. “Has anyone got a bucket?” someone asked half jokingly. One mother clutching her child volunteered a plastic baby bath she had just purchased. We were getting very low in the water and still miles from land. “Will you pray for us father” the passengers asked. And so I began to pray, as out of the corner of my eye I could see the life jackets being distributed. In the middle of my prayer I remember making a grab for one of the life jackets too, hoping that no one had seen as it seemed a bit like a failure of faith. There is nothing like fear to help one focus one’s priorities. My friend Noel was helping the children into their life jackets while I was digging into my suitcase to try and find among all my clothes my diary and address book in order to wrap it in plastic bags and tape. “Why are you saving that book?” one passenger asked, “you should save your Bible.” I did not explain that diaries where I came from were more important than Bibles and the thought of losing mine together with my address book made me more nervous at that point than drowning!

Horizons take a long time to get nearer but four hours later the captain ran the boat aground on the beach and we climbed off the bow onto the rocks. I really did think we were going to sink and have to swim for it, and now I was struck by two very strong thoughts: a real sense of admiration and solidarity for the people I was with and these brave children in their orange life jackets and a sense that it was their presence which had driven away fear, and a real deep peace within, a simple gratitude and thankfulness for life. It was a feeling of lightness as though one could set aside all burdens and the worries and doubts and simply be free. As the sun rose there was a reorientation towards God and life. I was acutely aware of how this fragile life of ours was gift, gift given to us; not something we owned or possessed or could ever completely determine or know, but our lives lived somehow in trust. Facing danger, facing our human vulnerability and failures, acknowledging death sometimes helps focus all we are, all we love and all that we long for.

Today's Gospel is another one of those tough Luke passages: a passage which seems to demand far more than we, clinging to our own diaries, agendas and relationships, may feel able or willing to offer. The vocabulary seems radical and impossibly difficult to reconcile with our loving Jesus. He says "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother brothers and sisters yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross cannot be my disciple." I have been thinking about that word "hate" all week, trying to understand it: hate father, mother, brother, sister, even life itself... What is he saying? Christ is talking about a reorientation, a reorientation which seems to demand a letting go, a separation from those securities in our lives. By why hate? I do not know; perhaps because our Godly calling does sometimes involve a tearing, a breaking, a weaning away from all that we depended on in order to find our real truths. And don't we all face those bitter tearings? All relationships need to be reborn as Christ calls us into his radical love.

Last Friday I went to visit one of my oldest friends. He was at school with me. Six months ago he went for a check-up for what he thought was indigestion and discovered after tests that he has extensive cancer. He has since then been very bravely undergoing chemotherapy but last Friday, exhausted by his treatment, he asked me what he would do if the treatment was not successful. There is loneliness and fear in that journey. I said to my friend: "if you hear that news I know you will still go on being the same person you have always been, all that you are – your kindness, your loyalty to your friends like me, all those people you have helped and supported in your life. You will go on loving and being loved." And somehow it seemed even more so, that had not been depleted by this illness but was more human than I have ever known him, no pretence, no façade, a painful stripping of securities, himself before God, all that really mattered concentrated, magnified. Perhaps we all need time to prepare our lives. A possibility of God's remaking. In all of this – a brutal cross, a tearing, but also, we believe, a healing, a transfiguration, beyond our understanding.

"Whoever does not carry his cross..." I visit an elderly couple I have known for many years. They have always welcomed me with jokes and laughter and cold beers. They call me friar Tuck. The smiles and the warmth are still there but beneath the surface I know the anxiety they are living. Ma has Parkinson's and is increasingly finding it difficult even to feed herself. Her husband Harold is her carer but he too has been in hospital and is much weaker and less able to look after her than he was. When I arrive they have brought Ma a new chair and her husband is watching her so attentively and giving instructions and encouragement as using the chair for support she tries to stand up. This getting old is not at all easy. And the underlying fear is who will leave who, when obviously both are so dependent on each other. This painful tearing. The agony of loving.

The only way we can perhaps understand Christ's teaching about letting go and leaving behind is if we see it in the context of Luke Chapter 15 which comes immediately after. It is of course the stories of the lost and found. It is when all seems lost that all that is of true value and of eternity is found. Again and again in the Gospels we are confronted with this contradiction –how loss becomes gain. How can a sign of death be a sign of life, revealing the dignity, the divinity of the human destiny? The cross is not some call to suffering, there is surely enough suffering in the world without encouraging more of it. Neither is it the call to renounce

relationships love in order to follow the way of death. Rather that our love and all that it involves leads us through the frightening unknown. In letting go and in living the love of Christ we discover that our relationships, our longings, our suffering, our hopes are held in his life too.

Two autobiographies I have read about in the last week struck me as illustrations of what it means to live that radical paradox of the cross. The first is Mother Teresa with the publication of a book of her letters and journal entries *Come be my Light* last week came the astonishing disclosure that Mother Teresa was plagued by a sense of disaster and despair for most of her ministry in Calcutta. Mother Teresa who has inspired millions with her faith writes:

“Alone... Where is my faith? Even deep down right in there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. My God how painful is this unknown pain. If there be a God – please forgive me – When I try to raise my thoughts to heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul – I am told that God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness, coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the call.”

If Mother Teresa could carry on for half a century living out the love of Christ and at the same time cope with this inner sense of abandonment and desolation perhaps there is hope for we the less saintly, as we face our own darknesses and struggles. Who would have thought that a woman who lived the incarnation so ardently could have faced such doubt. Her experience of Christ’s absence was the drive which made her long to manifest Christ’s love for others.

The other autobiography is that of someone completely different: Bobby Charlton who continues to be an ambassador to football around the world and has even visited Solomon Islands where he is greatly loved. Why is that it has taken him so long to write about his life when the likes of Wayne Rooney and Stephen Gerard after only a few years already have their stories on the market?

Bobby Charlton writes: “When I look back at my life I can see more clearly than ever it is a miracle. It would be possible to list 1000 good things that have happened to me before I deal with the moment when I regained consciousness and faced the scene at the airfield in Munich. But I knew I couldn’t begin to define my life before going back there.” In the Munich air crash he lost eight of his team mates, saw them laid out on the snow, “my dearest friends who were like brothers”. He knew that the certainties of his life were gone forever. “But what do you do? You hold onto what is most dear. You try to make sense of the fact that you survived while so many close to you did not. You carry the pain as long as you can bear it, and put it down, but only in the knowledge that maybe at the most unexpected time it will come back”. And Charlton goes on playing the game and encouraging others in the game he loved more than anything else and was, he says, more natural to him than breathing.

He has lived out of his suffering but transformed it into a vital passion and energy for others. That doesn’t seem such bad advice as we face our own crosses and live a calling given to us, a calling more natural than breathing.

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