



Maundy Thursday
Thursday 21 April 2011

Doing Things Differently

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Exodus 12.1-4, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26; John 13.1-17, 31b-35

This Passiontide, we have been taken on a journey into the present day experience of the cross, in our series *Victim no resurrection?*, through the lives of those who have been speaking here in church each evening, witnessing to conflict and suffering in the life of the world, through personal accounts of the experience of contemporary violence in all its forms; what it really means to be in the lowest place. With artist Terry Duffy's dynamic cross accompanying, provoking and comforting us, we have been led into experiences of war and conflict in Gaza, in Rwanda, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, what life is like in it and the lasting traumas and consequences that flow from it. We have journeyed through grief and mental anguish, through human rights abuses, through the many forms of contemporary crucifixion. We have for brief moments been with those who have stood in that lowest place and with those who are still falling there.

On Sunday night, Lindsay Hilsum, International Editor at Channel Four News, speaking about life before and after her time in the genocide of Rwanda, talked about how she coped with such extreme violence and atrocities and the struggle she faced as she looked at her own humanity and asked the question: Am I too capable of becoming someone who thinks nothing of killing a neighbour? Or is it possible to believe that I would act differently? The conclusion she was able to reach and the only one she could live with was the hope and belief that she would be able to act differently. But would she? Would we?

Throughout this series there have been the voices and stories of those who have held out that hope, in amidst suffering, that life should and could be different.

On Tuesday night Simon Western a Quaker, described the harrowing journey of grief at the loss of his son through homicide, and his life up on the tightrope between hope and despair. For him acting differently was about not getting stuck in the place of victimhood but grasping the life and hope in every day, filled with the memory and the energy and beauty of life that he had shared with his son Finn – climbing together, camping out by fires and sharing laughter, and life in all its fullness. Through an act of will and trust he is staying on the tightrope, living the inversion of the title of Terry's cross.

The trauma surgeon, Dr Swee Ang, spoke of abandoning her life into God's hands as she followed a call to work with Palestinians in Gaza and Lebanon, working in amidst the unimaginable suffering that the people there have had to bare.

John Catto, a major in the British Army, expressed very movingly his care for those under his command in Afghanistan. It was to them that he gave his allegiance and amongst those with whom he was serving that he witnessed the goodness of people, expressing itself in bravery and compassion for one another and for the people amongst whom they were set, and in the rigour of professionalism and even respect, not hatred, for the enemy.

Last night Sheila Cassidy, who experienced torture in Pinochet's regime in Chile in the 1970's, spoke of the freedom of abandoning herself into God's hands that gave her peace in the face of disaster. In solitary confinement, she played and replayed over and over in her mind, the writing of a blank

cheque to God of her life, 'Pay: One Life...'. She imagined tearing the cheque to pieces but then re-sellotaping it, and eventually handing it over to God; in the midst of brutality a way to come close to God.

In all these experiences and in very individual ways we have heard about the recognition of goodness and the desire to celebrate life and go deeper, in the midst of suffering. Not to avoid suffering, but to enter into it with hope. Like Bobby Baker, who in dialogue with Clare Herbert last week used humour in the face of mental illness to go deeper and find healing.

When Terry Duffy opened our series he explored the life and meaning to be found in his cross, and the different figures within it. The one that has stayed with me is the figure, whose arm reaches out to the right, inspired by a thalidomide boy that Terry helped learn to swim. This boy's desperate reaching forward against the water, has come to dominate this cross for me, it is an explosion of energy and life against all the odds. That reaching forward expresses for me what has been voiced in the lives and experiences of all those we have heard speaking. With its passionate striving and reaching out can this figure on the cross really be a victim?

Reaching forward and doing things differently, in the face of unimaginable suffering and betrayal is what we find Christ doing as we come together on this Maundy Thursday in this Eucharist of the Last Supper. In the radical reversal of roles as he bends to wash his disciples' feet and in the breaking and sharing of bread and wine, his own body and blood, he too is reaching out, like that boy, striving for life to be different and showing the world how. Like the little Palestinian children Swee Ang described so vividly in her talk and book, who had lost everything, family and homes, and stood amidst the ruin and rubble of the Shatila camp, in Beirut Lebanon, raised their hands and gave a victory sign, saying, 'we are not afraid'.

In these actions Jesus is fearlessly calling his disciples and us to go with him and find a new way of living and loving and acting, daring to believe that we too can do things differently.

The washing of his disciples' feet is a transformational moment. Jesus takes the lowest place, life *becomes* different because he chooses to act, serving with an action of loving humility. In doing so he makes it possible for there to be a new relationship with his disciples and for a new heart to be formed in them.

Down in the dust and dirt of life, engaging with what it means to be human, kneeling in front of them, their Lord takes their tired, dirty feet, holds them, cleans and dries them with a towel. In this disarming action they experience the physical reality of the kingdom of God. It is love in action, it is kindness, it is passionate humility. It is about receiving God's love and then being called to offer that love. To love one another as we have been loved by him. Many of those we have heard speak have been doing just that.

This is the kind of 'doing things differently' that is asked of us. As Stephen Cherry asks in his book *Barefoot Disciple* that some of us have been reading this Lent, an echo of Lindsay Hilsum's question to herself in Rwanda. 'Could I do that?' 'Would I do that?' 'Should I do that?' and '*Shall* I do that?'¹, Shall I live differently?

In early March I had the privilege of celebrating the Eucharist with Anthony Hurst, much loved member of this community, who was in the last weeks of his life. Anthony died peacefully in Trinity Hospice on 30th March and his beautiful funeral was held here in St Martin's last Wednesday.

¹ *Barefoot Disciple: Walking the way of Passionate Humility*, Stephen Cherry, Continuum 2011, p.27

On that day I sat where his visitors usually sit in his basement living room at his home in Pimlico. At the end of this simple Eucharist he paused and simply said as an affirmation or observation about what we had just shared with great certainty: 'It makes a difference, doesn't it.' It was a celebration of the Eucharist in its barest form. There was no church building, no Sunday morning regularity, no congregation or music. There was Anthony's ashtray on the table, a glass of water, his near completed *Last Things* and his family tree that he had written and lovingly prepared for his grandchildren, some flowers in a vase, very simple, just the two of us and Christ offered for us and in our midst.

What had we done? Broken and shared bread and wine, prayed, given thanks to God for life, prayed for loved ones, for this church community, the world, for Anthony in his last days. The Eucharist makes a difference because it makes us different. We are made different in the very act of receiving the generous love of God, offered completely, vulnerably, unconditionally.

Jesus is that love of God that we receive. Who on this same night that he is betrayed, acts differently, reaches forward fearlessly, takes bread and gives thanks and breaks it, and takes wine, and offers his very self so that all our striving and hoping and reaching out, and the strivings of all those places of conflict and violence and the personal suffering that we have glimpsed these two weeks, can find their home in his love for us and be transformed. His action can be the place where we begin to act differently.

One morning this week at Morning Prayer the sun came through the East window, gradually from behind a cloud. Even though the cross was there – Victim *no* resurrection - there was nothing that could stop the light. These actions are like that. They are like the certain promise of the dawn, even though the night is about to fall and we are in the lowest place.