



Sixth Sunday after Easter
29 May 2011

The Courage of Despair

A sermon by Revd Clare Herbert

Readings: Acts 17.22-31; John 14.15-21

“Because I live, you also will live”

In the name of God, Creator of all, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Thursday is Ascension Day and on that day in 1994 the highly respected leader of the then Labour Party – not yet New Labour – died of a heart attack at the age of 55, to the immense shock of his family, his friends and his political colleagues. His wife Elizabeth was nevertheless able to say some time later that despite them all living for a considerable period in bewilderment, anger and loss she felt from time to time a deep inner peace and calm which she had not expected to feel.

How can these things be?

How did Jesus expect his disciples to know the encouragement and consolation of the Spirit when they were facing the brutal and sudden end of his earthly life – my Peace I give you.

Recently I have been very close to many people in severe grief – today this Church send its prayers and love to Ann Roberts the leader of our C Club and to her family in her grief over her mother’s sudden death in Australia.

And even if you have not found yourself in that position recently, of having been close to somebody in death or grief, perhaps you have known the loss of your country or work or income or status or hopes – perhaps you have known the loss of betrayal, or the weakening of age, or the ghastly extinction of delight in life as you listen to the world news. At the very least you will have watched with me those terrifying pictures of the murderers and murdered of Srebrenica, over 7000 Moslem people in all and their still suffering loved ones surviving in pain and distress the betrayal of their deepest hopes, the realisation of their deepest fears.

I like most of you have seen at close hand people trying to come to terms with the massive chasm which yawns in our hearts and minds at the loss of an important beloved other – as a friend put it to me on the telephone this week – it’s like we are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle hurled up into the air and we don’t know how we will come down, or indeed if we will ever come down in a shape we know!

Can we ever really prepare ourselves for this disjointedness?

How may we cope if we find ourselves in it?

What can we do to help others suffering in this way?

The most important thing we can do for others is to be an agent of the Holy Spirit to them and hear again and again the story of loss – not try to change it, or alter it, or improve it, just hear it. When people are like disorganised bits of jigsaw their telling the story of acute loss is one way of their trying to get some handle on this, to start to reintegrate the bits of their life which some dear person once held for them in some part and can’t do now because of death. You can hold the bits of the

jigsaw, whether for a few minutes or a few hours or a few years as they try to start to look at them in a new way until they can hold those pieces held by another for themselves and understand the story, give it new meaning.

Jesus uses a beautiful word for the Spirit he will send his disciples as they try to get over the lack of his physical presence with them. The word is Paraclete – paraklytos – and it means one coming alongside – to listen, to counsel, to encourage, to prod even – one coming alongside. One of the most important things we can do for another is to come alongside and in doing so we become agents of that Holy Spirit who is the Comforter.

Then, if we are either holding another, or caught in experiencing loss ourselves it is helpful to pray and hear the story of Jesus. Antony Hurst, a priest on this staff who was also my friend and who died recently used to say to me frequently – I am just so glad I am a Christian because in Holy Communion I get a chance to remember death and its presence with us and to become prepared to face my own death. I used to wonder about that until Antony himself died and then because he had accepted it as the most natural thing in the world to be doing he was able to use the time instead of lamenting his own fate to prepare his friends and family and us here too to be ready. Antony was able to say let's talk about this if you would like to as Jesus was able to get his disciples to do, asking questions, getting angry at such a painful thought, offering response.

In the story of the man Jesus we watch the pieces of the jigsaw apparently unravel – friends except a few gone, family except one gone, body, mind and spirit disintegrating – brutally injured, given, spent. Yet a new integration is reached after the chasm has been experienced – very early on the first day of the week, while it was yet dark the new reality brought about by God in Jesus was made clear to us – Death has been swallowed up in God, it has no dominion over God.

And here is the third thing we may do. I am more and more convinced that we need to spend time pondering the immensity of God, the otherness of God, the God who drew into life the dead Jesus, the God who creates us and who is not as Paul declared to the people of Athens in today's reading not made by us! Grief like all strong emotional responses to life tends to throw us into an isolated inner world of our own pain. It's as if the external world and its glory and wonder, enjoyed just those moments before this death opened up a chasm for us, is suddenly completely lost and all is our own inner darkness – even God – what can God possibly do about this? Nothing – he is either non-existent or impotent or he would not let me feel so bad.

What we need to practice to be ready for these moments is absorbing tiny glimpses of the God who creates from nothing, gives light not from a lesser light but from utter darkness, and who will raise us to life by his creative power and not by any effort of our own. I am lucky enough to have as a tutor in some of my studies in Cambridge Angela Tilby who last week told us of a painting, an icon in Istanbul where Christ stands, the strong man at the gates of hell, grasping us by the wrist and heaving us out. It is that sort of God who we need in the face of death's despair – worship of the One who is. As St Paul said to the people of Athens we need to repent, turn ourselves around to worship God not some petty idol God of our own narrow making – to let in the mystery of God's creative future and power.

And here before I end I want to talk about the courage which may be fostered by worship and of the strength of the Anglican perception that in the end faith is essentially neither feeling nor knowing. It is rather an action – worship of God our Creator no-matter how we feel or never mind what we know.

Jesus said of our worship in Holy Communion – Do This in Remembrance of Me – and the word remember here is not have a glance back, or keep in your historical mind's eye – but re-enact, relive

for yourselves, rehearse the central fact in human history that disintegration was overcome in Christ, the pieces of the jigsaw came together in a new way, do this in remembrance, re-live Jesus.

The Archbishop of Canterbury who is with us this week on this Ascension Day – the day of facing bitter loss even in Easter's light – wrote these words,

“There is an open door that rests in the heart of every situation because of God's freedom.”

It is that hope in God's freedom which Jesus knew and which he passes on for us to celebrate on this Sunday of Easter and every Sunday, every anniversary of his death and resurrection,

“Do this, in remembrance of me.”