

Sunday 21 October 2007: St Luke

God is Love and Love is Healing

Reading: Luke 10.1-9

In 2004 after the fighting and bloodshed on the island of Guadalcanal where I had been living for many years had come to an end, we held a peace conference. It was called 'Winds of Change'. Although the brutality and acts of violence seemed to have ceased we were all well aware that the suffering had not and that the memories of all that had happened would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to heal.

At the Conference we had invited two South Africans to take part. I will never forget the story they told. A black South African called Letlapa Mphahale began by telling his story. He told us of what it was to grow up in a South African black township, he told of the deprivation, of the injustices and evils of apartheid – his own family's struggle against poverty and his own for education. He told us of how he became politicised from an early age and joined the ANC and eventually took up the armed struggle, how he crossed the border to train and eventually became a commander for the Pan African Congress and committed to the fight to end apartheid and justice for his people. He told how as commander he would organise and plan operations and his belief that that the armed struggle was now the only way to confront the brutality of injustice.

Then Ginn Fourie, a white South African University lecturer, began to tell her story. She told how she had grown up with all the privileges of a white South African background. She said she grew up seeing black people as those in the background who you employed to do the manual work. She was socialised into keeping her distance, and never to trust them. She told of the privilege of her white education, her university studies, her marriage and the best day of her life – the birth of her daughter. Then she told of how one night when her daughter was grown up and at university, she was watching television and she saw a newsflash that a bomb had gone off in a restaurant and she realised that was the very restaurant where her daughter had gone out with her friends for a meal that night. Then she saw on her own television what looked like the body of her own daughter. She told of her panic – her journey first to the restaurant, then to the hospital and then to the mortuary and the discovery that her only daughter had been murdered in the blast.

Letlapa then took up his story. He told of how after majority rule had come to South Africa he had written book telling of his life and struggle for justice. He described the book launch, how he had introduced his book and asked if there were any questions and then he had seen this white woman at the back of the hall stand up, and she asked him: "Why did you kill my daughter?" "There was a silence in the hall and I did not know how to answer her. I told her I would speak with her after my talk was over. Later I came towards her and I said, "I cannot answer your question with words but you must come back to my township and I will show you."

Ginn Fourie cut in, "I had spent years trying to find out who had ordered and planned the attack on the restaurant that night. This man was the man I most hated and feared. He had destroyed my life completely and here he was inviting me to go home to his village with him... to come and see for myself. And I suddenly realised I would never know any peace in my life, or any healing, unless I went with him. I phoned my husband and he was completely against it, he thought this was total madness but I knew I had to go. I drove

with him and it was a very long journey. When we arrived at his village there was a whole crowd – Letlapa’s family and people were waiting to welcome me. They processed with me through the streets and sang for me. They could not understand how the mother of young woman killed by one of their own sons would come to visit them. They took me to a church hall crammed with people and sang a song of welcome and put me on the stage. And I thought ‘what can I say to them?’ I was standing side by side with Letlapa, the man who had ordered the bombing of the restaurant where my only daughter had been murdered and I started crying and I said the only words which came into my mind over and over again “I am so sorry, I am so dreadfully sorry. I am so sorry that the ignorance and the injustice of people like myself led you to these actions.”

She could not believe what she was saying that she was apologising but for the first time she was letting go of the hatred and the grief and realising that she did not have to carry on hating. Letlapa said “When I heard those words and I saw the face in front of the pain, I knew I was in the presence of someone who was restoring my humanity and setting me free.” To see the humanity of your seeming enemy is the only way to reconciliation.

I am in England and a woman is talking to me about the difficulties she is facing. “I know you’re a priest”, she says “but I don’t do forgiveness.” If we don’t do forgiveness how can we be healed? How can we ever change and face our past or future with any hope of wholeness? I do not pretend this journey is easy or always immediately possible. I myself have still found it impossible to visit in prison those who were responsible for the murder of seven members of my community in Solomon Islands, although some of my community have done just that. Forgiveness is a journey. It is a hand held out against the odds. It is ultimately an undeserved gift: an act which mirrors God’s grace – that love is ultimately more powerful than all that opposes it.

This week we held a small memorial service at St Martin’s for a Congolese mother and her children who had just learnt that her daughter had been murdered in the Congo. And they asked me the same question we have often heard: “What is the point of praying and of God if our prayers are not heard?” Yet here in this mother was both the question and the answer – a mother who was filled with the love of the God she questioned. And the prayer within me was that she, and indeed we who joined with her, would not give up that struggle for love for if we did that would indeed be the victory of violence and hatred. This healing we seek is not a quick fix, not a theological idea to which we have given our assent, or a superstition from the past. This healing is the Christ orientation of our lives, towards peace, towards hope, towards life. It is the healing of which the whole of Luke, the physician’s Gospel speaks. Luke’s Gospel tells of a God seeking us at the core of our identity, a God revealed in word and action by Jesus Christ who sends his disciples out as witnesses, that God is love, and love is healing. This is the Gospel which begins with a young unmarried pregnant woman proclaiming the greatness of the Lord and announcing the divine reversal of social status, a Gospel which proclaims good news to the poor, release for captives and freedom for the oppressed. Luke shows us a despised Samaritan becoming the revelation of God’s love, he portrays the rejected beggar Lazarus, whose sores were licked by dogs as the inheritor of the kingdom, and the hated tax collector Zacchaeus as the host of the Lord bringing salvation into his very home. Jesus proclaims ‘the Son of man came to seek out and save the lost’ a God watching and waiting for his children to return, running to meet the returned prodigal – transforming mourning into dancing and festival.

At the memorial service for Beni Diza from the Congo, the victim of human brutality and war, we gather around the altar, the young son leaning on this holy table, looking up to

watch a piece of bread broken – a sign of human brokenness and death which will be a sacrament of life and hope – and a cup of wine, Christ’s blood which will become the sign of our forgiveness. Like Luke’s disciples on the road to Emmaus, in the midst of death for a moment we behold in one another the risen Christ who is still with us. A young Congolese family led by their seven year old son holding a candle – witnessing both to the trauma of death but also to the hope of resurrection and love, sent out: lambs among wolves. They lead us out of the Church into the light and we feel our hearts burning within us. Outside in St James’ Park the sun is shining, the horse guards march past, a band is playing, flags fly, and the balloons we have given the children rise up into a clear blue sky. This is the good news – the beginning of healing, that the first shall be last and the last first; that this mother, the very poorest, or the smallest child can become the bearer of Christ to the world. God is love, and love is healing.

On ‘Book of the Week’ on Radio 4, they are reading a book called *Blue Sky July* by Nia Wyn while I am preparing this sermon. And as they read I say to myself “Yes. That’s it.” That’s what in my own context I am trying to say, but she has captured it so perfectly in hers. Nia Wyn is a single mother whose son Joe has been born with cerebral palsy. She describes the pain of that struggle with total honesty but arrives at this expression of healing and love:

Some mainstream mothers at the school where I take Joe see my son as a shame, a tragedy. They call it brave to be the odd one out. They say they couldn’t cope and couldn’t do what I do. People rarely understand the shadow, they forget it is part of the light.

It is not like this:

*Sometimes at this window I think of all the things that I love more
more because of Joe and in this space I see our journey as some kind of pilgrimage
I feel we’ve found sacred space
and for every moment I still want to heal him,
there are a thousand when I know he is perfect just the way he is
He is my miracle.*

*I guess the world is pretty much as it was
Jesus hasn’t returned
but I have learnt something of miracles along the way and something of his love,
that seems to conquer everything,
in its small achievements of the day.
This love transcends the body and is a kind of exchange,
this love is all I need to know
to understand this love I guess,
is to understand the light,
sometimes we have to touch it first.*