

Revealing the face of utter human vulnerability

A sermon on Matthew 17:1-9, the Transfiguration

Ecumenical service at St Joseph's

Roslyn Wright, 6 August 2017

For the past 18 months I have been working as a pastoral carer in the health sector in hospitals and community work. Most of the time I have been caring for patients and families of those who have cancer, those who face life-threatening illness or treatments that are just as risky, and those who have lost a baby before its time.

There is a lot of tragedy, a lot of sadness and grief in that world. And yet I would not want to be working anywhere else. Am I some strange kind of voyeur or sadist that gets pleasure from the pain of others? I don't think so.

What happens is that I am privileged to be invited by people to sit with them in their grief, distress and pain. I have the opportunity to be with them, and hold them in that space, helping them to be there, to feel what they feel, to give voice to their story. That is sacred space, holy space, where the reality of the soul is laid bare. I have learnt to sit there and not look away, or change the subject, or try to make it better. I sit and I gaze at the naked soul before me, and what I see fills me with awe.

It doesn't matter whether the person I sit with has Christian faith, or faith of any description for that matter. I work with people of all faiths and none. Every human being needs to be able to share the things that are important to them, the things that give their life meaning, purpose and a sense of belonging.

Pain and tragedy have a way of paring back the superficial things of life. We are brought up against the reality of our limited life. We are going to die. We cannot control what happens to us or to those we love. We are weak, vulnerable, frail human beings. We naturally recoil from this within ourselves. We blame ourselves as failures for not being strong enough. We feel guilt, fear, and doubt. We are broken.

I know these feelings, and the aching rawness of these places in my own soul. I have not been immune from tragedy in my own life. What made a difference for me in those places was learning to real about what I felt, about who I was at that moment, and to stand, sit, or maybe just lie in the foetal position that was my own human frailty, vulnerability, rawness. I learnt the power of letting my heart stand open, being vulnerable, undefended. But I was not alone. I was held in love, the love of others who sat with me, the love of God around me. The story of Jacob wrestling with God in the dark is a story that reminds us that the wrestle, the struggle and conflict of the night, is the divine presence and blessing. We need to learn this time and time again. God comes to us disguised as our life.

But to consider our gospel reading for tonight: when you think about the transfigured face of Jesus that Peter, James and John saw on the mountain, I wonder what image you have in your mind? "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."

Often we are reminded in looking at this story of the divinity of Jesus, his holy otherness, something far removed from the troubles and tragedies of human existence, of life down on the plain below the mountain-top.

Jesus went up the mountain and was transfigured, and we assume that it was a wonderful experience. And so it was, but maybe not in the way we think. I want to suggest something a little different tonight, something that comes from my experiences of sitting with people as they share their pain.

What if the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus at that moment was the face of utter human vulnerability? A man who knew the tragedy that was to come: misunderstandings, not being able to live up to the expectations of others, followed by betrayals, suffering and death. All he could do was be who he was, open, exposed to God, exposed to Peter, James and John, standing in the sacred ground of his own human heart.

And the voice he heard there was a voice he knew, and voice that affirmed him in his being wholly human – “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

Jesus knew himself as Beloved of God. He was the beloved, willing to be betrayed, to suffer, to die. He did not turn away from that but walked whole heartedly towards Jerusalem. We Protestants, and especially those of us from the non-conformist protestant tradition that is where we Baptists stand, are not traditionally big on the suffering of Jesus. We like our cross to be empty. We tend to move quickly from death to resurrection. But there is beauty and awe to be found in contemplating the suffering of Jesus, the sufferings of others, our own sufferings too. It is not so much the suffering that I invite you see, but the human heart that is revealed to us in this. Can we look at these times of struggle, pain and tragedy, and see the glory of the open and vulnerable heart shining like the sun?

We are told that the Divine became human so that we might share in the life of God. I wonder too if the Divine became human so that we might learn to enter more fully into our own human life. Life is a gift. This gift comes with challenges, and there is nothing that comes to us that does not have the capacity to help us grow more fully in loving relationship with God.

Ignatius of Loyola in his Foundation for the Spiritual Exercises said:

We should not fix our desire on health or sickness, wealth or poverty,
success or failure, a long life or a short one.

For everything has the same potential of calling forth in us a more
loving response to our life forever with God.

Our only desire and our one choice should be this:

I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me.

God's deepening life is God's deepening love within us. To be open to that love there is something within us that has to break, a shell of protective self identity that has to crack and reveal the open heart that needs to know unconditional love. Jesus has stood in this place of open-hearted vulnerability. He heard God's love spoken to him, for him. May we learn too to accept our own open-hearted vulnerability and hear God's voice of

love in our lives, in our joys and in our times of struggle and pain. May God continue to work in us to deepen God's life within us.

At the end of The Exercises, Ignatius has this prayer:

Accept, O Lord, all my freedom.

Accept my memory, my mind and my will.

Whatever I am or possess, you have graciously given me;

I give it all back to you, to be completely governed by your will.

Give me only your love and your grace

and I am rich enough, and I ask nothing more. Amen