

COPING WITH PAIN

Readings: 1 Peter 4: 12-14 and 5: 6-11
John 17: 1-11

What places have you been to that have made you feel you were standing on special/holy ground?

For me, it's not churches or religious places, nor even any of the holy sites in Israel (except, perhaps, for the Sea of Galilee). No, it's places associated with suffering - huge suffering: Birkenau Concentration Camp; a school, Tuol Sleng, in Phnom Penh, used as a prison by the Khmer Rouge; the headquarters of the secret police in Budapest; a former prison by the sea in Cape Coast in Ghana, used by slavers. At these places you look at photos, shoes, graffiti, and the enormity of the past horror broods over it, and contrasts so much with the quiet as visitors go round silently.

I feel the same when I read Jesus' high priestly prayer in John's gospel, Chapter 17. This is Maundy Thursday; Jesus has just had the Last Supper with his disciples and has been talking to them. And now, apparently with them watching and listening, He bursts into this prayer to his Father: first for himself, then for his disciples, and later for all believers. The horror of what will come next day hangs over the scene as the disciples watch silently, horrified and bewildered, Jesus pouring out his soul to his Father. He's so apprehensive that He prays for himself first and then for others.

I notice at funerals that people often comment on the coffin or the flowers, as if looking at the detail is something they can comprehend in all the enormity of someone's death. Similarly, in Birkenau, Tuol Sleng, Budapest and Cape Coast it is the little details which you can take in and yet imprint the horror even more. In the prison at Cape Coast it was the rough earth underfoot in the prison, feet thick: decades of excrement from the prisoners centuries ago.

In Jesus' prayer there is something similar in the detail. The

prayer has a ponderous quality as Jesus fixes on precise phrases to try to keep himself under control and to help him cope in the face of the enormity of Good Friday:

“Give glory to your Son, that the Son may give glory to you! (verse 2);

“I have made you known to those you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me. They obeyed your word” (verse 6);

“I gave them the message that you gave me, and they received it” (verse 8);

“I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those you gave me, for they belong to you. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine; and my glory is shown through them” (verses 9,10).

Like the things I saw in those places of horror, the way Jesus speaks, his preciseness, the short bursts of words as He struggles to master his feelings, only serve to emphasise the coming horror.

And yet, for all the pain, this chapter is also the glory chapter. Six times in this reading “glory” or “glorify” is used, and it carries on in the rest of the prayer as well. “Glory” for us is a grand word, isn’t it, almost other-worldly, not a word we use in ordinary life. Not so in Greek, where it can just mean “good opinion”, “praise”, or “value”. Jesus may perhaps be simply saying, “Honour me, Father, so that I can honour you. That’s what I’ve done here on earth.” But He is probably meaning more than that. This is the first Sunday after the Ascension, when Jesus went back to the glory of heaven. And heaven is where God’s full glory blazes out with nothing to darken or dull it. I think Jesus is saying, “Father, I have shown you on earth; people have had glimpses of your full glory through me. Now, Father, in this last day, glorify me/vindicate me/shine through me, so that people will say with the Roman centurion, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’”

When we go through tough times, surely it’s fine to ask God to shine through us and to help us get through in a way which brings Him glory. And just as Jesus tries to build himself up for

the Crucifixion by thinking of his destination in heaven, we need to build ourselves up by thinking of our status as God's children, honoured, cared for, and loved, and also focus on our destination, when we will be with him in glory.

To finish: some years ago, I did a flower arrangement in church, in the aisle, for Good Friday. It had dead, twisted ivy in the foreground but golden flowers behind. And the verse I based it on was Hebrews 12:2:

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

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