

Love our neighbours as ourselves

The other day I was assessing one of a student Teaching Assistant's answers to a question in the Equality, diversity and inclusion unit of her qualification. She quoted a recent chat that she had had with a six-year-old girl during a reading session. The little girl announced she was engaged to be married to her classmate (who was of Asian origin). When the Teaching Assistant asked her what qualities she liked about him she declared: "his skin is the same colour as my Barbie doll's hair." The Teaching Assistant went on to write that the six-year-old told her "Miss, you are invited to our wedding and please could you buy us a toasted sandwich maker!" How wonderful. What an example of love and inclusion!

Paul, in our reading, quotes Jesus: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' yet this kind of love is very difficult. We tend to follow the girl who wrote on the back of a picture to her boyfriend: "My dearest love, I promise you my eternal love. As long as I live I will always love you. Nothing will separate us from each other. PS - I want this picture back when we split up."

I still remember seeing, when I was younger, Christmas after Christmas, the film "Bridge over the River Kwai". The film portrayed the brutal treatment of Prisoners of War forced by the Japanese to construct a railway line through the Thai jungle but I have only just recently come across Ernest Gordon's autobiography called "*Miracle on the River Kwai*" that tells an amazing story of survival in these prison camps. Gordon was a British Army officer captured at sea by the Japanese at the age of twenty-four. He was sent to work on the Burma-Siam railway line that the Japanese were constructing through the Thai jungle for possible use in an invasion of India. The men worked in 50°C heat, their bodies stung by insects, their bare feet cut and bruised. Death was an everyday occurrence. If a prisoner appeared to be lagging, the Japanese guards would beat him to death or bayonet them, in full view of the other prisoners. Many men simply dropped dead from exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease. 80,000 men died building the railway, 393 fatalities for every mile of track.

Gordon tells us that for much of the war, the law of the jungle ruled in the prison camp. As starvation, exhaustion and disease took its toll, the atmosphere became one of selfishness, hate and fear. Early consideration for each other was lost. To most of the prisoners, nothing mattered except to survive. He says that there was no church, no chaplain, no services, no worship. It was, Gordon wrote, that we were forsaken by our friends, our families, our Government and now even God seemed to have left us.

But something started to happen in the prison camp. It was Gordon's miracle. Stories of self-sacrifice, heroism, faith and love began to circulate around the camp. It was the custom among the members of the Argyll regiment for every man to have a "mucker" - that is, a pal or friend with whom he shared or "mucked in" everything he had. Angus had a mucker who became very ill but Angus was determined he wasn't going to die. When someone stole his mucker's blanket Angus gave him his own. Every mealtime Angus would draw his ration only to give them to his friend. The mucker got better. Angus collapsed, and died caused by starvation and exhaustion. The story of Angus's sacrifice spread through the camp.

Another event shook the prisoners. Japanese guards carefully counted tools at the end of day's work, and one day the guard shouted that a shovel was missing. He walked up and down the ranks demanding to know who had stolen it. When no one confessed, he screamed, "All die! All die!" and raised his rifle to fire at the first man in the line. At that instant a man stepped forward, stood at attention, and said, "I stole it." The Japanese officer in charge

became enraged. He put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, no shovel was missing. Indeed, there had been a miscount at the first checkpoint. There had been no missing shovel.

Again the story spread quickly. The incident had an immediate and deep effect and the sacrifice of this one man changed the hearts of those around him causing a transformation in the camp. Gordon wrote that the new spirit continued to spread. Death was still present but they were slowly being freed from its destructive grip.

Gordon was asked, by the prisoners, to lead a discussion group as they were wondering if there might not be something in Christianity after all that they had failed to understand, having been so emotionally scarred by their experiences and shaken by this new spirit of hope and love. Conversations referred to the issue of how to prepare for death but, as Gordon later wrote, "Faith thrives when there is no hope but God." Gordon knew they had to find out as much as they could about Jesus and through their readings and discussions they gradually came to know Him. Gordon became the unofficial camp chaplain. The prisoners built a tiny church, and each evening they gathered to say prayers for those with the greatest needs.

Gordon's book tells that the transformation of individual men in the camp was so great, that when liberation finally came the prisoners treated their sadistic guards with kindness and not revenge. The liberators were so infuriated by what they saw that they wanted to shoot the Japanese on the spot. Only the intervention of the victims prevented them.

The 2013 film, *the Railway Man*, is also about a story based around the Death Railway, as it became known. Eric Lomax, a 21-year-old signals engineer and railway enthusiast is one of the men who has surrendered. Sent to work on the construction of the Railway, Lomax witnesses unimaginable suffering: men forced to hack through rock and jungle, beaten, starved and prey to tropical diseases. He builds a secret radio to bring hope. As he whispers news of Hitler's defeats or American advances in the Pacific, the film shows that 'a thousand backs straighten and exhausted, desperate men resolve to survive another day.' When the radio is discovered, Lomax faces beatings, interrogation and much worse, mainly by one young Japanese officer. Barely surviving the war he returns home and haunted by the face of this officer, he shuts himself off from the world. Decades later, he meets Patti who he marries but on their wedding night Lomax's nightmares return: the young Japanese officer dragging him back to the horrors of the past. Patti finds Lomax screaming on the bedroom floor. Humiliated and confused, he disappears within himself again but then Patti finds out that the Japanese officer, who holds the key to what really happened to her husband, is still alive and a friend knows where he is. Patti tells Lomax and her decision sets up a return to Thailand for a stunning, unexpected and ultimately triumphant finale to an amazing true story of heroism and, above all, the redeeming power of love.

This is a different sermon for me. I have focused on two stories because I believe they are inspirational in their coverage of today's theme. Ernest Gordon wrote "It is hard to be a disciple, Lord". It is, Jesus never said it would be easy. In fact he said the opposite. But love conquers all, and, as we see in these stories, God wants to show His love and power even in the darkest places on earth. God willing, we will never be faced with a situation as grim as the tragic ones in our stories. But he can and will use every one of us to shine light on our world's dark canvas. Today is the moment in history that God has entrusted to you and me to make an impact in our little corner of the world. It is an opportunity that will never come

back again. It was Helder Camara who wrote in his book: *A Thousand Reasons for Living*, 'Don't let yourself be torn between yesterday and tomorrow, live always and only God's today.' In the death camp just a couple of duck eggs bought through the canteen could save a life. It's an example for us too that our own acts of kindness, however seemingly small and insignificant may also have an impact wider and deeper than we could ever imagine.

A Christian, Corrie Ten Boom, who helped hundreds of Jews escape from Nazi held Holland during World War II by hiding them upstairs, above her family jewelry shop, was caught and sent to a concentration camp. She was released, by mistake, just hours before she was due to go to the gas chamber. She became an inspirational Christian speaker and so often she echoed Gordon's words when she said: "You can never learn that Christ is all you need until Christ is all you have." In order to 'have Christ', Paul clearly writes, in his Epistle to the Roman Church, we carry a never-ending debt to love each other.

Peter Smith

10/9/17