

## Jesus College, Oxford. Evensong Feb 1<sup>st</sup> 2015. 17.45

*May I speak in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen*

My father was in surgery. At a crucial moment a piece of equipment failed – apparently a one in two thousand occurrence. He all but exsanguinated, and was left hanging on to life by a thread -his organs beginning to fail one by one.

And I prayed...It was clear that nothing bar a miracle would get him through this -and I prayed for God to save him.

What did I mean?

If someone were to have asked him if he was saved -he would surely have answered yes. By the power of the cross he was saved. He would have been pretty sure that through his faith in the saving work of the cross his soul was set free from sin.

But at the crucial moment that's not at all what I meant. When I cried to God to save him, I meant him, my beloved Dad, the whole him. The him I wanted to hug again. The him I wanted to solve all the world's problems with, the him I could climb mountains with. The whole physical, incarnate, embodied, created human being. At that moment I didn't care much about his eternal soul -when I cried 'God save him' it was the real, whole David that I wanted saved. As far as I was concerned God failed to answer my prayer.

Last week I posted a very stark cartoon on Facebook. There was a child in Africa with a stomach bloated through starvation taking a hungry bite out of a bible.

We don't do dualism do we? Except when it comes to salvation. *The work of the cross is to bring about salvation of the soul.*

I posted it because I'd just returned from India - from our link Diocese in Andhra Pradesh where, in the school where our charity is working, the teachers get paid £20 per month. Yep! That's less than 50p a day. In that context the very idea that there is some virtual message of freedom from oppression for the poor which is other than an enacted message is laughable. It is an insult to the incarnation. Why would God's reality be embodied if his message was abstract and purely spiritual -whatever that might mean.

This was at the heart of Jesus' critique of the professional guardians of the faith in his generation. All the theology in world is mere holy clap trap ( to quote Archbishop Justin) if it becomes cut off from the enacted faith that Christ demands. It's summed up in 1 John 4 vs 21 : "the commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.'

There is a wonderful story to tell about the way Christians have understood this and been at the forefront of some of the best reforms -I don't need to list them - but you mind might go the abolition of slavery, the Victorian's work with prostitutes, penal reform, the establishment of extraordinary charities. But the tension that Jesus recognised in his day between the religiosity and social action has never gone away. The radical freedom insights of Liberation Theology found

their hope in the fact of Jesus' real body hanging on the cross. Sharing in reality, not theory, with their own agony. The Catholic hierarchy did their utmost to suppress this script of real freedom for real people. 'Live with your sufferings in this world for your reward will be in heaven.' It is a perversion to use the cross as a tool of social control. In our own country we would have abolished the death penalty far sooner had not the Bishop's in the House of Lords argued on religious grounds against that reform. Today the voice of the church holds far less sway – the Bishop's efforts to claim that God teaches us to treat LGBTI people as less than equal was batted aside, and the county found the recent agonies over the role of women in the church simply risible.

Sadly, but perhaps predictably the religious establishment's reaction to a growing, and I'd suggest largely self-inflicted marginalisation, had been to become increasingly pietistical. We have become obsessed with our internal structures and processes. We care far too much about our stuff and far too little about the needs of our neighbours.

Pietism corrupts. How can you possibly, even if you hold some weird theological point of view which diminishes gay people, think of making it the defining characteristic of your faith?

The offense of the cross is not its messy reality, or even the power of self giving and weakness, it is the offense of the demands it makes on us. The cross should never allow us to collude with the oppression of the weak or poor in the name of God. That totally inverts the fundamental freedom of its message. But we do it and we do it in the name of Christ. Religion is the strongest rationale for the oppression of women -from the surrendered wives in America to the kidnapped girls in Nigeria -the church is afraid of shouting loudly that it is wicked. From the way we deprive married gay clergy of their living in this country, to the murder of gay people supported by some African churches that we fail to call to account -we are afraid of shouting loudly that it is wrong.

You probably know that a member of General Synod went to Jamaica to support the reinstatement of a law which meant 10 years hard labour for anyone thought to be gay -because it was what God wanted. That is gross - off the scale -but she is still a member of General Synod because we don't join up the dots. The offense of the cross is that Christ suffered with the weak and the oppressed right up to and beyond the point of death. We suffer with them right up to the point of marginal discomfort.

Now today we celebrate Candlemas. At one level -the pietistical level -it highlights the problem – the religious requirement for Mary to go to the Temple to be purified 40 days after the birth – hmm -thankfully we don't do the churching of women any more. At another level we see Jesus' mission recognised and affirmed at this early age. We see the first steps towards the cross.

Studying, as many of you do, at this college, is a recognition and affirmation of the qualities you bring to life and can very well shape the mission of your life. So there is a rather simple and awkward question I'll leave hanging in the air. Do we travel with Christ on the cross up to the point of marginal discomfort or can we allow the love that took him to that cross give us that same passion to transform

the lives of the poor and oppressed? How about the personal challenge to make our response incarnational, real, enacted not theoretical? Taking the reality of the cross so seriously that it would mean intervening to save a dying person rather than taking refuge in abstract thoughts about their soul being safe, or actually standing up for gay people rather than thinking it's all a theological dispute?

This sermon has the simple title 'The cross – perfect freedom.' In his latest book Timothy Radcliffe, having described the dehumanizing slave buying scene in *12 years a Slave*, puts it this way:

'Today millions of people are still reduced to slavery –domestic servants are held in bondage; people and even children are sold for sex. They too must strip and be ashamed before the judging eyes of their clients. Human flesh is turned I to meat. Jesus shares their humiliation. But with the yes of faith, we can see his nakedness otherwise. David stripped to fight Goliath. Jesus, the Son of David, strips to fight every humiliation that we endure, every shame that makes us shrink. He climbs the cross to win the victory for our dignity.'<sup>1</sup>

Amen

Rev'd Canon Rosie Harper. 1.2.15

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Radcliffe *Stations of the Cross*. Bloomsbury. London 2015 pg 50-51