

The Joy of Awfulness

Sermon for Jesus College Oxford, 14.10.12

A rosy fingered dawn prises its way through autumn leaves; cloud-girt mountain eyries throng with eagles; valleys fill with pearly mist; a stout parson faints in a rash attempt to circumnavigate his sultry glebe...

I don't know if people send you round-robin prayer emails, inviting you to scroll through simpering texts and mawkish photographic pageants that look like advertisements for air freshener; they do me, and if anyone here has a programme that can detect and destroy pan-pipe music in an attachment, I will pay handsomely.

Why is Christianity so commonly misconstrued as nice? There is nothing nice about it. We are called to hate our own families, our lives, to renounce everything we have in the world to be Christ's disciples. It aint no basket of kittens.

In our reading from Genesis Jacob, who frankly is not the sort of person you would want to take home to meet mother, wrestles with God by the brook all night - and comes away with a limp, the peculiar halting gait of someone marching to an altered rhythm. That's us, eternally out of step, battle scarred. My father, a man of wide sympathies and few words, dislikes religion because he thinks it makes people 'a bit weird'. I think he's right. We are invited to share in the life of Jesus Christ, in his unfathomable grace - the strangeness, the awfulness, of being a Christian.

So awful that no wonder when we're faced with it we tend to divert into something less, or something different. We might try settling for the basket of kittens, or for co-opting Jesus, or bits of Jesus, for our own agendas, we might try to spiritualise that unfathomable strangeness into something comfortably beyond reach.

I liked to settle instead for the romance of the cloister. From childhood I had been fascinated by the Christianity of the Middle Ages, or – rather – a Romantic version of it. I loved plainsong, Benediction, the architecture of the Romanesque abbeys of southern France, the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (I was that sort of a child). So when I was looking for a Theological College there was really no contest. I went to the College founded by the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, one of Anglicanism's boldest experiments in monasticism. A monastery in Yorkshire, I thought: peace, serenity, misty valleys, bare ruined choirs: I arrived, and found it standing between the M62 and a duvet factory. But that was as nothing compared to the disappointment to come.

I don't think I really believed in evil until I went to Mirfield – not because I was persuaded of its objective reality in a doctrine class, but because life in such places, or in cathedrals or Oxbridge colleges, could make Teresa of Avila defenestrate the Infant of Prague.

There is no *escape*; from others, which as Sartre observed is hellish enough - but, much harder, there is no escape from yourself. After one particularly gruelling term, when everyone fell out with everyone else, and there was no one left to exchange the peace with at the Eucharist, I went to see my spiritual director (one of the monks) and when he asked me how it was going I said *awful*. Awful?

Yes, I said, *I'm not as tolerant as I thought I was, I'm not as patient as I thought I was, I'm not as nice as I thought I was...* Oh, he said, *that's good*.

And it was. Awfulness is good: in it you learn, first, something fundamental about being human; the highly fictionalized character of our own marvelousness. And, second, for those so attuned, you learn something fundamental about being Christian: God already knows this.

My first reaction, however, was to ask my spiritual director if the community had a hermitage where I could go and take refuge for a while. *No*, he said, *and if there was there'd be a very long queue.*

What there was, however, was prayer. There was Mattins and Evensong, there was the daily Eucharist, there was Solemn Mass on Sunday and the Egg and Bacon Mass for the dinner ladies in the College chapel, there was Compline, there was Holy Hour, there was the Midday Office: one Lent there was even the Office of Readings led by students which lasted for two days before everybody fell out again. If you are looking for an opportunity to pray, then you can't really do better than a monastic community. But for me the most difficult and the most rewarding aspect of daily life there was not on the timetable. It was being alone in silence.

I got into the habit of going to church very early in the morning to spend half an hour in silent prayer. This was not heroic piety on my part but because it was the only thing that made the awfulness bearable. It sounds so simple, but it is so difficult; difficult to find the time and the space (although how easily we find the time and space to do other things); difficult to accustom ourselves to silence in a world which is noisier than ever; difficult simply to surrender, to let go of our own so-called 'needs', to ignore our internal commentaries, with all their evasions and incompleteness, and to tune to God's frequency, to find the signal among the static.

When I started doing it, it was with the Romantic expectation that I would step, like those ghastly Pevensie children, through the wardrobe and into Narnia, awaiting in all its enchantment on the other side. What I discovered was that my knees were approaching the end of their useful lives, that the low rumbling in the background was not the M62 but my gastric orchestra tuning up, and that I had the powers of concentration of a puppy.

A Romanian monk, with us for a while, gave me a *metanoi*, a knotted string a bit like a rosary, and I got into the practice of saying the Jesus Prayer on each knot; Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. My

breathing slowed, my turmoil calmed, and although I would often find that in spite of my best efforts to focus on the mystery of the incarnation, I was really thinking about the snooker, by observing the external discipline of saying the prayer, knot by knot, I began to yield to something not entirely of my own making.

While doing it, the rush of thoughts, impressions, mood, distractions dominate; it's only when I look back I see an odd angle, a surprising shape, left by a pressure I wasn't aware of at the time. It's a bit like going to the gym and sweating for six months to no visible end until one day you discover you have an ab. It's a bit like Jacob limping away from the brook.

I found keeping this discipline got harder, but I kept it up, not refreshed by a deep well of piety rising within me, but because I needed it. Without it I was simply too susceptible to self-absorption and the temptation to close down when beset by a sea of troubles. There was absolutely nothing nice about it at all, and if I ever lapsed into whimsy or tried to get away with disguising self-seeking motives as altruism, from the silence and the space there came back an echo, a disquieting ping like sonar, which I had to attend to.

I also had to attend to my thesis, which I wrote while at Mirfield, which looked at aspects of the Greek text of the Letter to the Ephesians, and currently resides, its spine unbroken, on a far shelf of the Brotherton Library in Leeds. During the most intense period of our collegial tribulations, in one of those 'tolle lege' moments, I was working on the passage we heard just now: "he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us". There's the awfulness, Christ abandoned to our murderous cruelty: and there's the joy, turning it into our peace, our hope, our salvation.