

The Cost of Caring

Lay Pastoral Ministers' Triennial Service

Wakefield Cathedral

Saturday 19 September 2009

W. H. Vanstone tells the story of the surgeon operating on a young man who had suffered an appalling accident. His life lay in the balance and his only hope of survival was through an operation that had never been attempted before and which involved great risk. The situation was heightened by the fact that the young man was a person of great brilliance who was expected to give much to the world through his talent and intellect.

The surgeon agreed to attempt the operation knowing that it would be extraordinarily demanding and that it could end in the young man's death. It was as tricky as had been feared – seven hours in the operating theatre. Ultimately it was a great success and the young man recovered and prospered. The amazing sequel or follow up to the tale is that the surgeon was utterly spent. He was literally led out of the theatre by the sister, following her like a meek lamb.

At the heart of that simple narrative stands the costliness of such care, such concentration, such attention. Both our readings suggest as much. The gospel reading is one of those amazing doublets which occur in the New Testament. One story is framed by another. Jairus tells Jesus of his daughter's illness and Jesus goes with him. On the way Jesus encounters the woman with haemorrhages and she is cured. Afterwards Jairus' daughter is also restored to full health.

In the story which is framed we read: 'Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned to the crowd and said: "Who touched my clothes?"' There is, in other words, a palpable cost to Jesus. Such healing was neither physically, nor emotionally neutral. Such care and giving are immensely demanding if they are to be worthwhile. The epistle reading captures a similar theme but this time not through narrative.

Paul reflects on both the sufferings of Christ and of the Corinthian community:

'If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings.'

The Christian life brings life abundantly, but it is costly beyond measure. The final fate of Jesus is the most telling focus of this. This could hardly speak more sharply to us this morning. We celebrate a rich lay ministry of pastoral care. You all have poured out time, skill and expertise in the care of others. It is a most potent expression of your part in the offering of Christ, as you work with your parish priest.

There is a slightly bizarre and even humorous tale told of Frederick Temple, the father of William Temple, when Frederick was Archbishop of Canterbury. Temple's ordinands spent their retreats with the Archbishop at the Old Palace in Canterbury. It must have been a gruelling experience – Temple was a fairly remote and headmasterly Victorian clergyman. When they came for their interview with the Archbishop they would (with no warning) find him writhing in pain on a chaise longue. It must have been a terrifying challenge. More than once the would-be clergyman would sit in the chair, or stand shaking, silently as Temple writhed on. After a minute or two, the Archbishop would sit bolt upright and say:

'Well, what were you going to do – let me die without a word or a care?'

It may have been a melodramatic stunt, but it made the point. Like Jesus, we should respond to suffering where we see it. He was on his way to see Jairus' daughter when the woman touched him. Despite the cost he could do nothing but respond.

Real care, proper pastoring, is a costly and demanding business. Indeed it is in some sense a participation in the passion of Christ. You'll be glad to know that we are not recommending that your parish priests operate a similar stunt to that of Temple with future/potential lay pastoral ministers.

In a most powerful passage from the letter to the Romans, Paul indicates how such costly giving is integral to the Christian life: 'Rejoice with those who rejoice,' he enjoins his readers, and then more darkly: 'Weep with those who weep.' The incarnation reminds us of how God is informed of our giving and our suffering in the passion of Jesus, his son. God pours out endless giving, endless generosity, endless costly love. That is the nature of creation, of letting be what otherwise was nothing. That too is the nature of redemption – Jesus pours out his life for all humanity. This is what you have entered into in your ministry and alongside all Christian souls. It is perfectly encapsulated by Timothy Rees in his great hymn, *God is Love Let Heaven adore him*.

‘And when human hearts are breaking
Under sorrow’s iron rod
Then there is the selfsame aching
Deep within the heart of God.’

Amen.

Readings:

II Corinthians 1. 3-7

Mark 5. 21-43