

Sermon for Matins – July 18th 2021

St Mary Abbots Church, Kensington. The Revd Alice Ormondroyd

Readings: Job 13.13-14.6

Hebrews 2.5-end

This week I had the privilege of hearing someone share their experience of intense, physical pain. As she spoke, I could see the impact that this pain had had on her. Her body visibly recoiled as she explained what had happened and how the pain had spread through her body. Her face bore the anguish of that pain, her voice the desperation of wanting it to end.

Physical pain is a part of the human experience which I feel is rarely reflected on in church. We might talk about pain as we consider emotional suffering, grief, loss, resentment, bitterness. We might meditate upon the suffering of Christ during Holy week. We do pray for those who are sick, including those who suffer with physical pain. But I wonder if sometimes we feel a bit confused about the theology of pain, about how we are to understand it, to make sense of where God is in it, to know how or why we experience pain, what we can expect when we pray to be healed from it?

As we've journeyed through the book of Job both on a Sunday and recently through our Morning Prayer lectionary, we can't escape the fact that Job's suffering is undoubtedly a very real, physical experience of pain. Job contends that he would prefer to die than to continue to experience such pain, and his poetic depictions of the condition of his flesh are certainly graphic and gross. In the passage set for today however, Job seeks to distance himself from his physical suffering, and instead his cry is that God will not continue to hide his face from Job, that Job will be able to hear God's call, and respond to it.

If we reflect on our own experience of pain, I wonder to what extent we can relate to Job? I wonder if we too have found in times of intense and unrelenting pain that our prayers intensify, that our cries to God become more honest, and simple, that we long for the nearness and presence of God in ways which we hadn't realised we needed.

We cannot escape the fact that there is a paradox at the heart of our faith. That Jesus Christ entered not into glory but first he suffered pain. That the power of God was made perfect in human weakness. And indeed as the writer to the Hebrews reflects, 'It was fitting that God, for who and through whom all

things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings'. Rejection and persecution are absolutely marks of Christian discipleship, but perhaps physical pain and suffering are also marks that we should come to expect too. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in the opening of *The Cost of Discipleship*: 'When Christ calls a man, he bid him 'Come, and die'.

There is something about an experience of intense, physical pain, that makes us so mindful of our mortality, of our frailty, of our weakness as fleshly creations. I've been struck recently by so many discussions about vulnerability, especially with regards to coronavirus. We are all being asked, quite rightly, to consider those who are vulnerable in our decision making as our freedoms are returned to us. This is, for us as Christians, simply a reminder that Jesus calls us to love God and to love our neighbour. And yet the description of 'the vulnerable' as a sort of passive, objective label that we plunk onto a particular group of other people seems somehow inadequate. Inadequate because it fails to account for the individual lives, names, stories, circumstances. It doesn't account for the fears, the anger, the tears, the frustrations, the sense of isolation, and yes perhaps even the physical pain.

What Job shows us is the power of individual story to highlight and expose vulnerability. When Job cries out, when he shows his pain, when he rants and rages and wrestles, his friends show up. Their response isn't entirely helpful, but at least at his cries they show up and respond to his suffering. Pain and suffering should not be hidden away. We have permission to be vulnerable, to say that we are struggling, to say that we need help. I've found the writing of the American author Brene Brown incredibly helpful on this subject; in her book 'Daring Greatly', Brown describes vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." Her main argument is that when we think of times that we have felt vulnerable or emotionally exposed, we are actually recalling times of great courage. She writes, "What most of us fail to understand...is that vulnerability is also the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave...Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy courage, empathy, and creativity."

The theology of suffering as depicted in our reading from the letter to the Hebrews, when framed with the lens of vulnerability, therefore makes sense in a different way. Christ, as one who has suffered real, physical pain, becomes the one therefore who is able to journey alongside those who also suffer. The strength of acknowledging our vulnerability, our pain, our need of help, is

actually a gift, a strength and courage which gives permission for others too to share their struggles and vulnerabilities. And somehow, in this great uncovering of the reality of our lives we see the revelation of Christ made manifest to us in new and surprising ways. We enter into his glory through entering first into his suffering.

We pray today for those who are suffering from pain. For those who are feeling vulnerable but are afraid to show their vulnerability. We pray that Christ may equip us all with the confidence to be honest about our pain, to allow others to minister to us, and to see through them Christ's presence with us. Whatever this next week may hold, may we have the confidence to be vulnerable, knowing that we are held in the tender embrace of God and amongst the faithful and caring pilgrims that God has placed around us in this Church. May we cry out, and know that our voices will be heard, our hands held, our tears wiped, and our pain known by the Christ who suffers with us.

Amen.