

Day of Private Reflection 2009

Reflections on Bible Readings for Sunday 21 June 2009

A Day of Reflection provides space to reflect, personally and collectively on a tragic past, publicly acknowledge pain, renew commitment to the process of peacebuilding, ensuring that never again will we resort to violence to resolve our differences and conflicts. It provides space also to be courageous and dream of a different and better future. Our reflection, therefore, connects with the past, present and future. But there is more liberation and healing if we reverse the flow: future, present, past.

Being a Sunday gives an added dimension to reflective faith. The 21st June already has the suggestive symbolism of being the longest day. It is the day in our northern hemisphere when there is the least darkness and the most light. The symbolism does not minimise the reality of darkness for those who have suffered and who carry the emotional and physical scars of the tragic past. The symbolism of the day is of light, the light that is always there, but at its greatest today, and therefore becomes the symbol of hope. There is nothing cheap about hope, no superficial optimism, but a refusal to believe that the darkness of human experience has the last word.

From a Christian faith perspective, every Sunday is resurrection day. This is no '*Jesus lived happily ever after*' story, but the affirmation that when the systems of hatred and violence had done their worst, God said yes to the ultimate power of love, non-violence, justice and peace. All of these values embodied in Jesus were vindicated. Life can be lived hopefully and differently. Summer equinox and resurrection day provide us with profound reflective foci for this year's Day of Reflection. They also provide us with lenses through which to reflect on today's readings from the Judeo-Christian scriptures.

I Samuel 17 (1a, 4-11, 19-23) 32-49 – Living With a Violent History

Emerging from over three decades of violent conflict, itself part of a longer history of centuries of violent conflict, makes Bible reading easy or difficult. Texts have been used to legitimise and justify violence in Ireland's past and present and God has been invoked in historical political documents to bless violence. In this context the story of a young boy killing a giant in battle makes for easy reading. The story and other stories of violence in the book of I Samuel make very difficult reading for others. How can God be involved with such killing and violence? How do we live with a violent history in the Bible and in the modern Irish story? Is violence an inevitable part of human experience? Are we '*hard wired*' for violence? Today's reading from the Hebrew Bible might help us reflect on the violence of our history and the ambivalence towards violence within ourselves.

The story of David and Goliath belongs to a larger context in Israel's story. The opening chapters of I Samuel reflect on a period of radical social transformation in Israel. A time of confederal tribal government through judges had ended and was being replaced by the centralised governance of monarchy. It was a time of critical tension in Israel with some wanting a monarch like other nations, which meant militarism and social elitism. Others like Samuel were opposed to monarchy fearing that this would take the small community away from its more egalitarian socio-economic and political existence. In other words monarchy like that of Israel's neighbours would lead to abuses of power, violence and injustices. I Samuel reflects this period of crisis and transition. Saul's reign descends into violence and tragedy. David does a mighty deed in killing the Philistine Goliath on his way

to the throne. David's reign is idealised and becomes the benchmark for the subsequent history of Kings. Though David is often portrayed as hero, as in the killing of Goliath, he is no paradigm of virtue. A royal theology develops around David's reign, but it becomes a violent use of royal power to defend royal privileges. A prophetic theological tradition has God refusing David the right to build a temple because he was a person of bloodshed and violence. Violence and worship are always incompatible.

David's successor Solomon is a complete disaster as monarch, using royal violence and provoking community violence through his abuses of power and social and political injustices. By the end of his reign violence is all-pervasive and the kingdom violently and tragically divides.

The Bible tells it as it is, including Solomon's pious prayer at the dedication of his temple. Violence and injustice invoke God to bless the systems!

These stories of monarchy, of which the David and Goliath episode is a part, need to be read in the light of Israel's prophetic tradition. In this tradition God is portrayed as sovereign Creator and Sovereign over Israel, and in total contrast to Israel's history of monarchy. Royal theology and prophetic theology do not mix. God's rule has a moral bias to justice and right relations based on social, distributive justice. God's rule is therefore not morally and theologically neutral and that includes towards militarism and violence and their unjust abuses of power and structures. This portrait of God is foundational to Israel's deepest insights into God and essential to Israel's most profound vision of communal life.

A difficult reading, when placed in its larger biblical context, opens up radical reflection on our tragic history of violence and an alternative vision of a future with a moral bias to social justice and right relations.

Psalm 9 v 9-20 – Victims Shall Not Always Be Forgotten

There is little consensus in Northern Ireland as to who is a victim. Some want to claim victimhood as a badge of identity. For others it is a political point. Innocence is the key issue for others. Yet others who have suffered in the violent conflict do not want to be known as victims. Anonymity is the wish of some. Victim remains a contested term. Yet many died and many more suffered physically and psychologically, and for all the pain remains. For many it may never go away.

A Day of Reflection does not need to address the contested nature of victimhood. A category or label does not get anywhere near the depth and trauma of human suffering and loss. Perhaps only God knows the depths of all suffering. Certainly in the face of a suffering community only a suffering God will do.

Hebrew poetry, or what we call the Psalms, moves across the entire spectrum of human experience. The majority of the Psalms are Psalms of lament, complaint, argument with God, expressions of anger and sometimes, understandably, longings for vengeance. Israel's faith knew when and how to call God into question and demand answers from a silent or absent God. That was and is faith.

Today's Psalm is a bit more hopeful, but not in any superficial way. It should be noted that Psalms 9 and 10 belong together. They were originally a single poem, every other line from the beginning of 9 to the end of 10 beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew

alphabet. This single poem holds two different responses in tension. The key note in Psalm 9 is thanksgiving or gratitude, while Psalm 10 is complaint or lament. How can faith hold together thanksgiving and lament, both gratitude to God and complaint? For Israel it was not either/or, but both/and. That may well reflect the strangeness of human experience and is closer to human reality than either/or.

Victims shall not always be forgotten. In Psalms 9 and 10 the afflicted, poor and oppressed are remembered. These Psalms were probably sung at worship in Babylonian exile, the very location where at first they could not *'sing the Lord's song in a strange land'* (Psl 137). Somehow they found voice again. In their trauma and pain they found a suffering God who was utterly committed to justice and right relations (righteousness). They came to know God and their experience or knowing was of a God who stands for justice. The God who *'avenges blood is mindful of them, he does not forget the cry of the afflicted'* (Psl 9 v 12). The One who *'avenges blood'* is not a punitive God wreaking vengeance and destruction on those who oppress and inflict violence and suffering, though justice does demand that the right be done. Here the words mean *'one who values human life'*. God values life and so God remembers those who cry for help. Those who belong to God are the afflicted, poor and helpless. Only God knows the depth of suffering and perhaps God alone knows the victims. There is much that is beyond our human and limited grasp. *'The Lord is King forever and ever'* (Psl 10 v 16) and God's restorative justice will be. This faith impels us into the post-conflict struggle to partner God at work in the world, in valuing life and working for restorative justice and right relations.

II Corinthians 6 v 1-13 – Suffering Love and Reconciliation

Nelson Mandela is a high profile global senior citizen. Physically more frail now, his moral and spiritual stature remains as strong as ever. We may not fully understand how Mandela, after spending decades suffering confinement and isolation in prison, emerged through the prison gates with so little bitterness and so much willingness to forgive. How this victim of apartheid was able to act towards his oppressors with such moral and spiritual authority is awesome and even mysterious. From a Christian perspective it is the mystery of grace, the power of suffering love which is the heart of God and the universe. Mandela did not switch this on a few days before release from prison. His life to the point had been a process of becoming. On release from prison he was what he had become. Dealing with justifiable bitterness and opening wide his heart (II Cor 6 v 13) in forgiveness and restored relationships to his oppressors was and is an art that requires nurture and practice. The moral and spiritual authority of Nelson Mandela was a major dynamic in the transformation of South Africa from an apartheid state to a rainbow nation. Suffering and reconciliation always go together.

These indivisible themes are the heart of Paul's' second letter to the Corinthians, especially chapters 1-7 and 10-13. The letter as it appears in the Christian testament is more likely his fourth letter to this faith community, possibly even his fifth or sixth. Between the two letters he seems to have written another and II Corinthians itself may be a composite of two or more letters. This may reflect the depths of the problems and divisions Paul had to deal with through correspondence with this awkward and problematic faith community. However many letters some editorial friend of Paul has cut and pasted to form II Corinthians, the unifying theme is suffering love. God is portrayed as a God of suffering love and God's power is not power over or almightiness, but crucified power. For Paul the death of Jesus was an expression of crucified love and power, saying something radically different about the God of life from the god of empire, or the god of much of

Christendom. If Paul himself has any moral authority in his life and ministry, it is because of his suffering at the hands of imperial power and oppressive systems (II Cor 6 v 4-11). Paul too has moved beyond bitterness and nurtured the art of forgiveness, expressing a different form of power, the power of suffering love in his relationships with the Corinthians and others. The Day of Reflection provides space to reflect on how we use power in our relationships, and how power is used in the politics of governance in Ireland and elsewhere.

The other key and central theme in II Corinthians 1-7 and 10-13 is reconciliation. In chapter 5 Paul has articulated reconciliation as the heart of God's purpose for all life and the essence of Paul's ministry as servant of God in the world. The reconciliation theme continues into today's reading. Paul's assertion is that cruciform love is reconciliation. Suffering love is reconciling praxis in God and by the people of God. An act of reconciliation is an act of suffering love, God's act towards us and our act of genuine, cruciform love towards others. Paul's deep concern is that the Corinthians have not '*accepted the grace of God in vain*' (II Cor 6 v 1). In the context, what else could that be but the refusal to practice reconciliation in the world?

Reconciliation is a social concern and practice. In community, relationships are put right. In his letter to the Romans relationships are put right through the practice of justice (Rom 5). Relationships are restored, hostility and enmity are ended and alienation is overcome. Nothing of this is possible through power over others or power as domination. Reconciliation is power with, power shared and is shaped by the cross of Jesus. It is cruciform love as reconciliation. Perhaps it is only those who know suffering love who can become the reconcilers in our society. Can our suffering past lead us to the desired reconciliation?

Mark 4 v 35-41 – A Perilous Crossing to the Other Side

How goes the decade's long journey of reconciliation? Perhaps the greatest danger of the present is to think that the conflict is over, the problem of community division solved, and we can simply get on with life. The war is over. There are not a few signs that people of faith and others have settled into that delusion. Peace, in the words of a Hebrew poet and the Christian first letter of Peter, is to be pursued. That suggests it is often elusive. Reconciliation is a lengthy process not a quick fix or a fast food. Peacebuilding and reconciliation are generational, even a three-decades activity. Sometimes they are high risk and it may be that we prefer a comfort zone to the demand and risk of being peacemakers and reconcilers.

Mark tells not one but two stories of perilous sea-crossings. The second is found in Mark 6 v 45-56. The story-telling language reflects images, symbols and mythologies from the Hebrew Scriptures and the East in general. All of Israel's neighbours had mythology depicting the storm god triumphing over the raging water of the monster of chaos. Hebrew poetry picked up this theme in contrast to Baal and Marduk, the Canaanite and Babylonian gods respectively. Psalm 107 v 23-25 portrays God in combat and victorious over the forces of chaos, often symbolised by the sea. Mark's imaginative story-telling echoes and reflects these myths, symbols and themes and offers profound insights to a faith community struggling to exist in a war zone. The foreground to Mark's gospel is the terrible Jewish-Roman war of 66-70 CE. It was not an easy place for the small Jesus movement community to be.

There is a suggestive reflection in the fearful and desperate cry of Jesus' friends as the wind and sea rages. In the maelstrom of chaos, a brutal war zone, who cares? There is no one to share the distress, panic and fear. Who cares for us in our suffering? There is the intense loneliness of suffering, a seemingly solitary experience. It would have been the experience of a small faith community caught in the middle of a Jewish-Roman war, suspect from both sides. It was the experience of many during our 30 years plus of violence. Who cared, especially after the story disappeared from the front page and many were left in the loneliness of their grief and suffering. Sometimes not even God seemed to care. Perhaps some have never recovered a faith in a loving, caring God. Some may even have survived without faith. Reflection today may take us to deep and strange places.

Both of Mark's sea-crossing stories have a radical sub-text. *Let us go across to the other side*' (Mark 4 v 35), is not a mere geographical reference. Chapter 5 begins on the other side, a strange and foreign place with mad people and mad pigs! Chapter 6 sea-crossing ends with another border crossing into a place full of sick people. The *'other side'* is a symbolic locale, a journey to the unknown, the foreign, the *'other side'* of humanity (Ched Myers). As in Eastern and Hebrew myth the sea symbolises chaos, threat and danger. There are huge risks in going to the *'other side'*, real-life social hostility. It is dangerous activity. Jesus' *'integration activity'* might threaten to *'drown'* the community of faith. But the sea-crossing to the *'foreign land'*, the *'other side'* has to be made. The sea-crossings are risky stories of radical reconciliation. This is core to Mark's vision of the kingdom or reign of God. Active faith goes to the *'other side'*. For Mark it is the essence of discipleship. Today's gospel may make a Day of Reflection uncomfortable, certainly challenging.

**Rev Dr Johnston McMaster
Irish School of Ecumenics
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