

## troubled hearts

*'Do not let your hearts be troubled'*. What a ridiculous injunction in a tormented and tormenting world. Who, but the dead and the *un-* and *inhuman* – we might ask -- have untroubled hearts?

It is no surprise that the opening sentence of today's Gospel should be so popular. It is undeniably comforting. *'Do not let your hearts be troubled'*. It is immediately followed by *'Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.'*

That second quote is tricky from a scriptural point of view. On the surface it too is comforting (after all, none of us want to be left behind or excluded and the idea of being rescued features in our collective consciousness and you will have spotted how it underpins the Christian story).

For those who like to dig around the gospels, either because it's their day job or as a matter of interest, these words prove a little difficult. It is 'end of time' stuff and the difficulty arises from differing forms of what in the trade is called 'realised eschatology'.

In what we have just heard, Jesus gives the impression that he will go to the father's house, then return, at which point he will gather up the disciples and take them to a permanent dwelling place. This is at odds with other parts of what is called the 'farewell discourse' in John's Gospel, where the suggestion is that Jesus's return is in the form of his fellowship with the disciples *in this life*, and not a departure to another realm.

Well, heigh-ho, the gospels are far from straightforward and John's Gospel in particular is a challenge; in any event, there is much we can't know. And if you'd like to engage with

John a little more you might stick around to hear Angus Stuart in his re-telling (from memory I gather) of John's Gospel here, this afternoon, at 2pm.

Let us stay with the opening line: *'Do not let your hearts be troubled'*.

I am assuming that most of us can immediately identify with having troubled hearts; not in the cardio-vascular sense, but where the heart serves as a metaphor of our essential selves.

Over the years I have encountered people who seemed at first not to have troubled hearts, but turned out just to be private types, understandably concealing these things (you can't blame them; many of us do the same); and I have encountered some who seem entirely devoid of troubled hearts (indeed of any moral or sympathetic capacity). They can be chilling. Maybe you've met similar people.

Most of us have some sense of our troubled hearts, even if we tend to keep this to ourselves and speak only to trusted friends. We are acquainted because we find ourselves in a world shot through with both beauty and horror. It is right to be as suspicious of those who describe life as unalloyed joy as much as those who report – and peddle – only gloom. Both the ferociously positive and the drainingly joyless need saving from themselves. And not infrequently we need saving from *them*, too.

It is such a cliché to say each of us is unique that it is hard to see what in reality that means. Different, yes, of course; yet similar. Individual, yes, of course, but also connected. Estranged from many things, yes, of course, but also reconciled and dependent and inter-dependent.

Perhaps the meaning is a little clearer when it comes to how we are shaped by early experience, because we can never be sure in what myriad ways these react and inter-react to

produce...me, you. And then that me/you engages with, responds to, external things. So, two major sets of variables, and a glimpse of our individual uniqueness.

Our passage through life inflicts wounds, and we suffer. Those that occur during our formative early years are of special significance, and of special reach. Indeed, they reach across our entire lives, and often we are unaware of them, except maybe in oblique ways. This may sound excessive, but my hunch is that many of us reach our graves without discovering what wounds we bear *or how they have impacted our lives* – and those with whom we have had contact.

Perhaps this sounds vague, so I'll try to give examples. Experiences in our formative years shape us, for good and ill. Those which wound may cause shame, or doubts about our worth, or deep anxieties. A harsh remark, some loss of closeness (or withholding of closeness), implicit messages about what we should be like because of our sex or gender or class or colour or background or shape. Or the impact on our evolving selves of the world's violence, or its often fictitious truths and inhumane priorities.

We are now more alert to how children and adolescents may be harmed, but still have much to learn about the more subtle harms inflicted and embedded in these formative years.

Trauma is generally thought of as a major, usually a specific, event. It is. And it is can also something that is more nuanced, happening over time. Sometimes called developmental trauma.

In recent years there has been new thinking and writing about shame and trauma which occurs in these years of developmental vulnerability, and how it impacts our lives as adults. This is not the place to develop that. But if it has any mileage – I am certain it does – it leads to the possibility that for many of us such wounds remain unresolved yet active and influential into adulthood. What then tends to happen is that in various ways we 'manage' them, contain

them, almost always unconsciously, unaware of their power in the present.

*'Do not let your hearts be troubled'.*

Why might this line of thinking be important to the life of faith? First, because the God we speak of has concern for our wellbeing, and this inevitably, inescapably, includes our healing – truly, our healing (and not of only the 'acceptable' wounds but of our wounded dark places). Second, because buried harm in our hearts adds to the pain and violence in the world.

We may lament the way in which cycles of violence and suffering pass from generation to generation despite our best collective endeavours. Could it be that the cause is closer than we imagine?

Etty Hillesum was 29 when she died in the Nazi Holocaust. Her diaries are very moving. She once wrote: *"Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves.... and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will be in our troubled world."*

(I wonder what might be the godly outcome if we church goers gave as much time to attending to the hurts we bear as we do to confessing sin?)

We are still celebrating the season of Easter, still celebrating Christ's resurrection. Perhaps we might think about what that means for our lives, *lived now*. You might conclude that the question of healing and wholeness now is as important a question as physical resurrection after death.

Could it be that we have an important task at hand – that of our own resurrection through healing of wounds we are barely aware of? Wounds that, though concealed, affect our lives and those around us? It's just a thought, an avenue of exploration. One that takes God's love for us seriously.

*'Do not let your hearts be troubled'*