



Wrestling with stone

Jesus said Do not think that I have come to bring peace. I have come not to bring peace but a sword..... and one's foes will be members of one's household.

This morning, early, a crane arrived on Jermyn Street to lift over the wall a monumental sculpture by the British sculptor. Emily Young. Emily herself was here. And for the next 6 months, we will be hosting an exhibition of her angels here in our garden. It's a collaboration with one of our neighbouring galleries in the parish. We will have before us over the next months these beautiful heads in an astonishing variety of stones: brecciated onyx, classic igneous rock, blue purbeck marble, dolomite limestone. Millions of years old.

And we have in church today the Emily Young angel that is actually ours; it belongs to St James's and normally sits outside my study door in the reception area of the Rectory. It was bequeathed to us by Robin Miller, a long-standing member of St James's congregation until his death in January 2011.

For Christians, art has often been a way of expressing something profound about faith.

The spiritual link goes something like this; if you experience something exquisite, something beautiful, something that is itself a window into eternity, then what we can see points us to, reminds us of, the God we cannot see.

In medieval art, painters painted halos as a way of expressing the unseen divine presence. Now, most artists wouldn't do anything so obvious. There's a parallel within faith too. Reflective Christians will want to respect the theological equivalent of halos, pre-modern doctrines and beliefs, but now we want to look for new ways to express the mysterious presence of God and the layered meanings of Jesus. Just as some people might ask why we still paint landscapes when we have photography, Christian faith wants to ask questions not just about what we see, but about the quality of seeing.

It's a question that occurs in buildings like this in services like this, a fundamental question: is there a God, and if so, what is God like? For us, as Christians, we don't want our faith reduced to a list of things to be memorised, rather it is a life to be lived, and a language to be learned. Not just what we see, but about the quality of seeing.

As I read the readings for today, I experienced a pang that I've had 'off and on' over the years, that sometimes I wish Scripture was a bit less realistic, a bit more fluffy, somewhere to escape to, to have a break from real life. But Christianity just isn't like that. For me, Christianity never lets me off the hook to disappear into some fantasy-type religion that will just tell me everything is fine and all is in the end as it should be. That kind of faith, always resolved, always sure, is the kind of faith that simply, disastrously, leaves things as they are me as I am.

For myself, I come back, when I hear this difficult gospel to a kind of resigned recognition that Christian faith was never designed to be nice. Christianity is a faith that really does try to name some dark truths and grapple with some murky stuff.

In artistic terms, the gospel paints a picture of Jesus's life that expresses not just beauty but horror. A truthful gospel that insists on facing the most troubling, the most frightening, the most shameful, regretful realities of violence and cruelty in the world. But in facing those persistent realities, refuses to collude with them, but addresses them; does not abandon us for them to dominate us or destroy us, but dares to address them insisting in the end that life transforms death, that love is stronger than hate, that beauty transfigures horror.

And it's in that spirit that I approach the gospel today, which faces us with uncomfortable truths about religion and about people.

And I approach it in the knowledge that as Londoners we have seen our city rocked recently, making us think twice about walking across Westminster Bridge, or shopping in Borough market. And that not just in London thousands of people have had their lives turned upside down in the aftermath of the tragedy of

Grenfell Tower. And that many thousands more lie awake on the 24th floor of their tower block trying not to imagine they can smell smoke. In this week of the anniversary of the EU referendum, we are reminded that we live in an economically very divided country, and the extreme extremes of the murder of Jo Cox and the Finsbury Park mosque attack have reminded us of the hatred that wants to terrorise and frighten.

And so, what do we do with this gospel? Jesus said, 'Do not think that I come to bring peace but a sword.' And then listen to the story of families divided, listen to the illustration of a householder divided from the household, and hear Jesus's demand that the cost of discipleship might be not less than everything?

With this gospel, I have some choices here.

I can ignore it or reject it. Because it's the kind of thing that can knock a teetering faith over, this is the kind of thing that's wrong with all religions.

And I do want to say that, from time to time, that's a good thing to do with all bits of Scripture. We can't deal with everything, all of the time; and so, if this is you this morning, then feel free to set it aside, and try to face it another time.

I can also decide to wrestle with it, which is what I'm doing in front of you, wrestle with it, believing somehow that there is some deep wisdom in here and not wanting to simply set it aside and pick the bits I find suit me better.

This wrestling needs energy though and as individuals we will ebb and flow with this as much as the next person.

And so, this is where I've got to with it after my own wrestling. In the light of the really, troubling events in our city, I do not believe that this difficult saying of Jesus is a call to arms. But it might be a statement of inevitable division. A sword divides, yes, and is capable of killing, but Jesus doesn't say a spear, which would be a more unequivocal statement that violent revolution was what he was teaching. This sword is a statement that division is almost, perhaps is, inevitable when truth is told, and when a Christ-shaped life is being lived.

Because in Matthew's gospel, these teachings are all in the context of what it means to be a disciple. When my life becomes more and more Christ shaped, when a church becomes more and more Christ shaped, conflict will inevitably come from vested interests which do not benefit from such a way of living. It's a way of saying that conflict is normal, and that while a disciple will never seek it, a disciple should never be surprised by it.

The weekend after next, we will fly a new, large rainbow flag outside the church during the Pride march and we will host the Christians in Pride Service. Our attempts to live a Christ-shaped life as a church lead us to say unequivocally that our LGBT identities as human beings are not a sin from which to repent but quite the reverse; part of the glory of God's created humanity; signs of the abundant life Christ came to proclaim. This brings us into inevitable conflict with others.

Three years ago, a group of us travelled to Bethlehem and saw a huge wall which, whatever the reasoning from the Israeli government, brings multiple injustices to ordinary Palestinians. Our advocacy for the people of Bethlehem brought us into conflict with some others which continues to this day.

Of course, in the slogan made famous by Jo Cox, it's right to say that we have more in common than whatever divides us, but we are also not telling ourselves the truth if we try to appease real and sometimes intensely expressed differences. And it doesn't stop those differences ultimately expressing something curiously and unpredictably beautiful.

And so perhaps Jesus's sword analogy of inevitable division can be likened to the division that is necessary to create this sculpture. This stone is hit hard, cracked open, and what emerges, eventually, eventually is something beautiful; a new truth. In this creative process, the cost of staying true to the unyielding mystery of the stone can seem very high.

And as Emily Young says, *I may open in one knock something that took millions of years to form; dusts settling, water dripping, forces pushing, minerals growing.....*

The colossal energy that has made this rock into this rock, has been channelled, harnessed through the creativity of the sculptor. And so, in this sculpture, now so beautiful and silent, I can still hear the commotion that got it here; the screaming of the stone cutter, the chiselling and the hammering, which now rest in this monumental, still call to silence.

This gospel is difficult if we stand up and read it out; its verses have been co-opted over time to legitimise violence and excuse cruelty. All the more reason, when we have the energy, not to ignore them, or not to try to expunge them from our Scripture.

In the prophet Isaiah (33.7), the angels of peace weep bitterly over the warfare waged in the city. And the angels of peace must weep now over the funerals of Grenfell Tower residents, over the attacks in London Bridge, at Finsbury Park mosque, the ongoing bloodbath in the city of Mosul and all over the world.

And our prayers in this place, every day will be prayed in the presence of these angels hewn from rock, bursting with the energetic wisdom of the ages. And so, in these troubling days, we have in our midst, a sign of a longer perspective, a profound reconnection to God's created earth from which we come and to which we know, we know we must, every one of us here this morning, soon return.

And so, I end with Emily Young's own description of her work by way of lament and hope in troubled times. *Here are stony tears, pathos, and passion; a subtle memory of stillness, of joyful surrender to nature. A dignity".*

Emily Young 2008