



## break the cycle

I feel disappointed with myself, even a little naughty, when the day's readings don't fire my imagination. Today is such a day. I hope you won't mind then, if we leave them undisturbed.

*We are in the season the church calls Lent. My, how difficult it is to make something real of it. Churches and church people can have a rather narrow idea of how to approach it. 'Lent Courses' are inevitably on offer, and there is the usual stuff about giving up this or that.*

But mostly I reckon we have allowed Lent to settle into a narrow pre-packaged range of goods and tropes which tend to trivialise the serious purpose we claim it serves. In this, I'm as bad as the next person and worse than many.

In this morning's Collect we heard: 'Holy God, by the prayer and discipline of Lent, *may we enter Christ's sufferings* and by following the way of the Cross come to know the glory that resurrection brings...'

Why enter Christ's sufferings you might ask, when you're likely to have enough your own? And isn't one of the terrible features of suffering that, like the proverbial ticket, it is 'not transferrable'?

If you have ever been in a terrified and terrifying place in your mind, it's the incommunicability of its horror that adds to its horror. That's not to say that the love and care and attentive compassion of others don't help (they certainly do), only that the experience itself cannot be shared. We can feel compassion, but we cannot share the experience.

I wonder then, whether I can 'enter Christ's suffering' even to an approximate degree? I can

only behold and contemplate it across a vast hazy distance of time and interpretation, and draw from it what I can.

As it happens, despite that distance and haze I am struck by a stark and astonishing element of that distant series of events, one which seems of huge relevance. It speaks to me something of Lent and its value. But first, the context.

The context is human suffering, explicitly that which arises from human violence. On Friday we heard of the mass killing 49 (today reported as 50) people at two mosques in New Zealand. Last Sunday, here, in church, two of our homeless guests provoked each other and violence broke out. It is likely that some of us here this morning have witnessed violence of some kind or another in the past week. It is likely that some of us here this morning felt a violent impulse in the past week, even though we did not act on it.

Yet, act on it we most likely did, in 'thought' and possibly 'word' if not in 'deed'.

When people don't deliver what we hope for, say what we don't like, when they cut us up on road or pavement or in conversation, when they don't show the respect we seek (this list could go on a long time) we may well feel a flash of annoyance, of anger, of violence.

In workplaces, in homes, between friends, between strangers, with lovers, in our engagement with the great edifices of life (bureaucracies, schools, hospitals, businesses, churches, mosques, synagogues), in sports, everywhere where people gather, you will find moments of annoyance, of anger, of violence. Like the iceberg, much of this will be below the surface. And it can simmer and fester. We can

spend many an hour polishing our grudges and rehearsing our resentments. I immediately put up my hand to that pastime.

Might any of this be useful to our wandering through Lent more purposefully? I think so.

It can be said that Jesus died because of violence: the violence that seems always present in some way or other wherever power lies; the violence of the State; the violence of the mob; a violence that would appear to be present to varying degrees in virtually every person.

I can't be alone in puzzling over why violence (in thought and deed) seems so endemic, and why it appears to be transmitted, from one generation to the next. It simply never ceases.

We've grown taller, we live longer, we have (not everywhere) universal education and (also not everywhere) universal health care. We're more literate, informed and mostly better off than humans have ever been. Why, still, is violence (the impulse and the act) such a persistent element of human make-up, even when concealed and regulated behind good manners and civilised behaviour?

Well, that's a big question, isn't it. And a central one. And leaving aside the possible causes, I wonder if the life and death of Jesus says something about breaking the cycle of this endemic violence, this transmission from one life to another, one age to another?

Let me go back to what was said about whether any of us can 'enter Christ's sufferings' even to an approximate degree? I suggested that we can only behold and contemplate Christ's suffering across a vast hazy distance of time and interpretation, and draw from it what we can. And I claimed that despite that distance and haze there is a stark and astonishing element which seems of huge relevance.

It's what Jesus is recorded as doing in the first of the so-called Seven Last Words from the Cross. Luke has him say (Lk 23:34): *Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*

Maybe it is too familiar a quote to strike home (over familiarity with the story being a big problem for churchgoers).

Maybe we focus on the 'forgive' bit without considering what it may be seeking to achieve (viewing it perhaps as an end rather than a means).

Forgiveness is notoriously difficult to deliver when we are the aggrieved party (let's not doubt that), though we usually enjoin it readily enough on others.

*What if here, Jesus is disrupting, severing, cycles of violence by breaking cycles of blame and hatred?*

Scapegoating is a habit of humans. We condemn – even demonise – people and groups and write them off in shockingly un-nuanced ways. We do this, so the theory goes, as a way of exporting our own terrors and demons and hatreds on to those groups, and then banishing them in some way or other as 'not like us'.

In the Bible, 'a scapegoat is an animal that is ritually burdened with the sins of others, and then driven away. The concept appears in Leviticus, in which a goat is designated to be cast into the desert to carry away the sins of the community..'. Its bad news for the goat and an easy, evasive move for the scapegoaters.

You may feel overwhelmed, consciously or unconsciously, by the violence of our species and the many ways it finds expression from muted pavement conflict, to political discourse, to mass shootings to genocide. You should. We should. It is indeed overwhelming.

Some of those situations we cannot directly halt or redeem or heal. But that leaves scope to deal with what is within our grasp, drawing on that remarkable action spoken from the Cross.

And not only actions within our grasp. Within a body of thought called Chaos Theory there is the Butterfly Effect. You've maybe heard of it. It says that a hurricane in China might find its origin in

the flapping of a butterfly's wings in South America. If the butterfly had not flapped its wings at just that place in space and time, the hurricane would not have happened. Another way of putting it is that small changes in the initial conditions lead to drastic changes in the results.

If that is so, might there not be similar connections and results when I pass on the violence or refuse to, in all the small irritations of my day?

Might your decision not to transmit your crossness but to counter with a 'Father, forgive them (and me)' contribute to saving some

unknown person in unknown circumstances from becoming the actor or victim of some dreadful future headline?

Might we believe that by trying with all our will and effort never to transmit *but to break cycles* of violence, we might be doing what is required of us, that which Jesus exemplifies, makes explicit, in that most forlorn and dreadful moment, dying on a cross, mocked by his killers? *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

It's one heck of a Lenten discipline. But not, of course, confined to Lent. Amen.

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