Between Ascension and Pentecost: contemplative active living

The very best and the very worst of humanity has been on display in the media this week. At Lichfield Cathedral, the family of Stephen Sutton, the teenager who died aged 19 of cancer shared the rituals surrounding his death with over 10,000 people who visited in person and with many more online and over Twitter. I found myself not only moved by the photo of him with his trademark thumbs up sign but wondering how I would have reacted at 19 myself – or even, how I would react now. It was a story that somehow, perhaps because of the ordinariness of the disease, and the extraordinary of Stephen, made me think really hard.

But in India, two teenage girls were raped and hanged with the apparent indifference of the police. The blurred news pictures, saving us as viewers from the horrific detail, only served to emphasise the cruelty of which human beings are capable.

And links have started to be made between this and other news stories concerning violence against women, including the death sentence passed on Meriam Ibrahim in the Sudan for apostasy, and the stated aim of Elliot Roger in California to kill women before embarking on a day of violence in which he murdered six people. The links have to be carefully made, but public discussion, especially in public religious spaces such as here in church, is vital. The truth has been told in these stories this week that there are in a variety of cultures, fuelled often by religion but certainly by an assumption that women are fundamentally less valued than men, attitudes that tolerate violent language and violent action towards women simply because they are women. And lest we here become too complacent, we should add that a full quarter of all women in the UK suffer domestic violence during their lifetime. It’s enough to make even the most empowered, articulate independent woman feel less safe than she wants to.

I spent some time yesterday at a literary festival which has been established to explore themes not only of literature but of faith. The session I was taking part in was, paradoxically, a discussion about silence. We discussed the fact that in spiritual practice, there are different kinds of silence, ranging from a consented communal silence to an unjust silencing of another. We talked about the importance of words, of voice, of speaking up and of action, in the tradition of Christianity, but we also talked about the necessity of silence to help us know what to say, to give us strength and staying power when we act too.

This balance between the contemplative and active is a hard one to strike for individuals and communities especially when we are confronted by the stories and statistics of this week. But we meet here today in the gap between Ascension and Pentecost: the moment between the Ascension, the mother of Christian mysticism; the mysterious and inexplicable departure of God and promise of the Spirit: and Pentecost – the communal spiritual experience that galvanised the disciples to action, to speaking out and activism in their own communities.

The balance is difficult but this is the day to discuss it. If we are all action, we burn out, get ourselves stuck on “transmit”, and before long can’t remember why we’re fighting or campaigning in the first place. All contemplation and the danger is that we can become quietist, inured to the suffering of others, believing that we can’t affect anything anyway.
The prayer that we heard in the gospel is one that John places Jesus saying at the Last Supper. On the eve of unimaginable violence, and with the future very uncertain for them, he is praying for his friends.

*I have made your name known to the ones you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.....protect them so that they may be one as we are one.*

In fact, for those of us eavesdropping on this prayer, we know that this prayer was, by a human measure, totally ineffective. Jesus’ friends were not of course protected; many of them died at the hands of those who wanted to destroy this fledgling faith.

But this is not a logical atomised dynamic where we can see cause and effect; any who have spent any time exploring the depths of the spiritual life will know this. There is something, rather than linear, more circular about this prayer, action, consequence, prayer, action consequence, prayer that deepens rather than explains God to us, and ourselves to ourselves.

In the middle of a hectic crowd, on a street in Bethlehem on the West Bank, Pope Francis stopped his car and rested his hand and head on the wall that separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem. This silent and unexplained prayer in the midst of the most intractable political violence was beamed around the world.

The same Pope travelled also to the Western Wall, the remaining wall of the Temple in Jerusalem. Similarly, his silent and unexplained prayer was a silent symbol, and an invitation to two presidents to the Vatican to pray with him.

Beyond words, in the midst of politics and campaigning, in the midst of grief and impassioned calls for justice, silence and symbolic action speaks into the clamour and heartache. Broken bread, wine poured out, water on the head of a child, oil anointing the hands of a dying woman. When Jesus was alive, he sometimes spat on the ground and made mud as part of a ritual of healing. He didn’t need to – he wasn’t a wizard – but he was expressing something symbolic to express something without words. In front of the woman caught in adultery, he wrote in the dust before saying to the baying crowd that the one who was without sin should throw the first stone.

This discussion of the balance between action and contemplation reminds me too of the famous saying of Mahatma Ghandi when he said that he believed there were two types of people in the world: those who take action and those who take the credit. His advice, he said, was to be in the first group: there’s less competition.

There can seem to be a tension in Christianity – as in many religions – between the mystical, the experiential, the silent, the contemplative – and the changers of society, the bringers of justice, the doers of things. These things can play out in a church too: and in our own selves. We are frustrated and angry at the injustice and suffering we see: what can we do? A faith that has no expression in real life in real everyday work and home and politics is not alive, it is dead.

But it is striking to hear that the night before the world-changing action of the crucifixion, Jesus is embarked on a mystical path: we hear language more closely associated with the Buddha or other spiritual teachers of inner development and enlightenment. A sense of unity with all that lives, with God who created all that lives – a deep knowledge of oneness and what we would in our times call interdependence.

Because most people who come to this church on a Sunday don’t live within the parish boundaries, we are what’s known as a “gathered church” here today. During the week, at work, at home, far or near, you might call us “dispersed church”. But church we remain; we still belong to one another and to God.

At our APCM a couple of weeks ago, we talked about the series of discussions that the PCC is having arising from our questions about the building which is currently a café at the west end of the church. The questions are around
whether we as a church would like to develop another project – probably still a café of some sort, perhaps a bakery, perhaps a social enterprise. From this, it’s becoming obvious that we must continue to think about our whole life together, as a gathered church.

What is it that we are communicating by our presence here by Piccadilly Circus? How can our activities; the café, our debates, talks, concerts, art exhibitions, festivals and so on, stem from and be rooted in our celebration of the Eucharist which is the heart of our common life? Over the summer, you will be asked to take part in these discussions, to visit other cafes and answer some simple questions about how you found them and what we can learn from them. More next week on this, but a community meeting will be held in the autumn after the summer of visiting, to have a more wide ranging discussion together. The key question is, for the gathered expression of church, what is the life we live together, and communicate to our neighbours: rooted in our prayers, outward looking, both contemplative and active?

And so we learn in this in-between Sunday that there is a mysticism deep within the active and decisive life of Jesus that helps us here. Because it is in mysticism that we learn to celebrate ambiguity and uncertainty. Jesus of Nazareth can seem, in the hands of some interpreters, tremendously certain about everything, with an answer and a pronouncement to suit every possible occasion. I suppose I do want to counter that, as the Jesus I find in the gospels is elusive, poetic, adventurous, experimental, deeply silent and constantly imagining and embodying a new future which drew him irresistibly into conflict with a self-centred human spirit busy competing in self-centred institutions.

The words of Christ in John’s gospel are deeply wise when he says: “it is to your advantage that I go away”. It challenges us to bring change to our society without retreating into religious platitudes; it challenges us to be grown up about our faith; but it releases us also to wonder and to rest in the endlessly creative spiritual presence of God and the beauty of the world in which we live. It releases us also to rest in the everlasting depth of the grief of the spirit, grieving with us at our own losses, groaning at the distress and injustice so evident in the world.

It’s very important that we don’t see this as somehow extreme spiritual experience only for the experts; mysticism is thoroughly ordinary, part of your and my human nature. It could be called a radical aloneness. Yes we rightly talk a lot about community and connection, the importance of relationship. But in focussing on our spiritual selves, for example by gathering together to pray this morning - we know too inside ourselves that we are radically alone: dependent on the one who creates and holds us – called to be ourselves and only ourselves. This realisation can be a huge relief, releasing us from the expectations of others; energising, inspiring.

The gospel stories are brimming with wisdom, mystery, energy, grief. They are companions in what is at times a luminous world, at times an unforgivably cruel one. But they embody a way for us as individuals and as a community that is resolutely offering out of its own rootedness, a promise of a new way of life. A promise of deeper justice born of our compassionate recognition of the mess, the mess, the mess and tragedy of our own lives and society in a world that is irreducibly beautiful too. Amen.

Lucy Winkett