



Terrible beauty

If you've spent more than a few minutes here in St James's since the middle of December, I suspect, like me, you will find it impossible this morning to not see what is no longer here. I'm referring of course, to *Suspended*, Arabella Dorman's extraordinary artwork installation, a thing of terrible beauty which hung above our nave for 8 weeks, compiled of over 700 colourful garments that once belonged to refugees of all ages - men, women, children and babies - salvaged from the beaches and roadsides of the Greek island of Lesbos. The installation finally came down on Friday and is now enroute to its next incarnation at Canterbury Cathedral. For those of us who have lived and prayed in its presence during these last two months, and so in effect have been praying also with and for all those who once wore those clothes, it's impossible not to be aware of the large footprint it leaves behind as we look up this morning. It may have gone, physically, but the emotional and the spiritual link is still very strong.

We are a changed people because of the experience of having *Suspended* here, not just through the events, talks, performances and debates that happened here around, beneath and because of it, but simply by that daily resonance as we've journeyed through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Candlemas.

It literally brought home to us – in every sense and on every level – the desperate reality and situations of the lives of thousands of people just like us that might otherwise have been kept out of sight. Under and through it we have formed and renewed friendships and working relationships with individuals and organisations. Beneath it we have welcomed thousands of visitors, and held all manner of services – countless Carol Services, Midnight Mass, memorials, a

baptism and a funeral. Our Winter Shelter guests have slept beneath it for a total 10 of nights. We've eaten Christmas lunch below it, watched a very current and searing play, challenged others and ourselves and even knitted teddy bears.

After we hosted *Flight* two years ago – *Suspended's* predecessor, also by Arabella Dorman, in which a salvaged inflatable boat hung from our ceiling – we knew that we were forging a permanent link with what I came to think of as 'our 62' – the people who had been rescued from that very boat. Now we carry with us a new and much larger group – that numbers in the hundreds, about whom we know even less. Like 'our 62', we may never know their names or stories – and indeed whether or not those stories are ongoing or have ended in tragedy.

Peter, James and John's elevated episode with Jesus lasted moments rather than weeks, but they too were changed people because of it. They couldn't unsee let alone forget what they had seen on the mountaintop. They didn't understand exactly what had happened, but it was a powerful, mysterious and mystical experience that made a very deep impression and would have stayed with them long after they came back down. Not easy to put into words, perhaps just as well Jesus ordered them to not say anything to anyone.

But what did it mean and what was it for? From the Gospel account it seems fair to say that whatever it was, whatever happened on that mountaintop, it was chiefly for the benefit of the disciples rather than Jesus. Jesus led them up to its summit, but then played what could be described as a passive role. What happened happened to him in front of them. And so Peter, James and John

witnessed Christ's appearance change dramatically, they saw Moses and Elijah appear and start talking with Jesus before they were overshadowed by a cloud. (Whether it was the three disciples overshadowed by the cloud, or Jesus, Moses and Elijah, or the whole lot of them is not clear.) But what happens next is very clear, the voice of God is heard from the cloud and they key words in what God says are identical in all three Gospel accounts, *This is my son . . . listen to him!*"

In the midst of an enigmatic experience that is so visually compelling, the command is not to look, but to listen. To listen to what Jesus says – to his words, his observations, his stories, his prayers, his teaching. Immediately before the Transfiguration, Jesus has been foretelling his death and resurrection to the disciples. Immediately after, he tells them not to say anything to anyone until after the Son of Man has risen, and shortly after that he once again declares that 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' Perhaps the sight of the dazzlingly brilliant Jesus in his full divine glory is enough to equip the disciples for the darkest moments that lie ahead, or enough for them to trust the things he now tells them that they are reluctant to hear and as yet incapable of understanding. But it seems the reason for the disciples' exposure to the vision is to reinforce Jesus' teaching, that suffering lies ahead and is an essential part of Jesus' journey and mission.

It is to that terrible beauty – the journey to the cross and beyond, that we turn our attention today, as we prepare to enter Lent. At the end of today's service, we'll be processing outside to our courtyard, where we will burn our crosses from last year's Palm Sunday to make the ash for our Ash Wednesday services this week. Once again, there will be opportunities to receive the imposition of ashes – the sign of the cross on your forehead – throughout Wednesday, in three services here in church and throughout

the day in our market, where we will offer 'ashes to go'.

This Lent we are offering a study course based around the recent television series *Broken*. Each Sunday we will screen an episode at 9.30am and then offer times for drop-in discussion groups to explore some of the many themes the series raises. This means that you're free to come to whichever session each week suits you best, rather than having to commit to a specific fixed regular meeting. It will be very helpful for us in planning the drop-in sessions to have some idea of numbers, so at the end of the service, please do use the sign-up sheet to let us know if you'll likely to come along.

For those not familiar with *Broken*, let me say a little more. Written by Jimmy McGovern and set in an estate parish in the North of England, the series stars Sean Bean as Michael Kerrigan, a Roman Catholic priest and child abuse survivor, and his ministry to people struggling with a number of difficult issues including abuse, suicide, poverty, mental health, debt, gambling, fraud, homophobia, guilt and shame. It is not for the faint hearted. It's raw, hard-hitting and gritty and features a great deal of swearing. It never once seeks to shy away from, or gloss over sensitive, emotive, challenging and uncomfortable realities, but rather shows the terrible beauty of a broken wounded healer seeking to stay faithful to God in the face of widespread and acute suffering. I should also add it's brilliant. It doesn't seek to provide easy answers, but stays faithful to the doubts and emotional and spiritual struggles of both the priest and his people in the yearning for forgiveness and redemption. It offers glimpses of transfiguration, albeit fleeting. It takes seriously the struggles and challenges of faith in 21st century Britain; it takes suffering seriously and has been described as 'staggering', 'brutal and bruising', 'harrowing' and ultimately 'hope-filled'.

For me transfiguration is about those glimpses – not always of glory, but of deeper realities. It's about shining moments that give

us the strength to face times of struggle and suffering and sometimes those glimpses of glory happen in the middle of suffering. I'm thinking particularly of an example here at St James's, which I share with the permission and blessing of those most closely affected. Last summer, we held a very special funeral here – for baby Rowan, the precious much-loved and longed-for child of Lia and Jonathan. On the morning of the funeral, Lia and Jonathan spent some time with Rowan in Lucy's study, before carrying his little wicker casket into the church for the service. The most straightforward route was out of the rectory front door and across the courtyard to the main Piccadilly entrance to the church. It being a weekday, this meant carrying baby Rowan through our market. Our market manager and traders bent over backwards to make sure the market fell quiet for those few moments and the sense of sympathy, support and solidarity was palpable in the silence. Lia describes it as "a beautiful, God-filled moment."

I'm also aware of moments of transfiguration in our weekly breakfast for asylum seekers and refugees and know such occurrences also happen at our winter shelter, when people with vastly different life experiences come together and differences dissolve in the sharing of a meal, a game of table tennis, the collective endeavour of completing a crossword or joining in art activities together or in that sense of connectedness in singing a song to which everyone knows the words. So often, we are filled with wonder at the stories that are shared and skills and talents uncovered that transcend all our everyday differences in culture, creed, class, language, nationality and social status. And so often, as *Suspended* reminded us, we are struck at the frustration and waste of such talents going to waste as lives are lived in limbo.

One of the many reasons I love theatre is its ability to open up and explore other possibilities and perspectives and to gain a deeper understanding of others. Those other possibilities don't have to be a million miles away from our own but sometimes can be

parallel. The current and searing play I referred to earlier is called *The Host*, and was performed here for three nights recently by the National Youth Theatre as part of our *Suspended* programme. Set on a Croydon housing estate, it tells the story of a young woman, Yas, who lives in a small flat, and her three sisters who all live together nearby in the home they formerly all shared with their mother, who has recently died. The four sisters all had different fathers – Yas is mixed race. Yas is just about getting by but her sisters are caught up in ever-deepening debt. By chance Yas finds herself first allowing a vulnerable and likeable homeless Syrian refugee, Rabea, to spend the night on her sofa and from that one chance encounter, she goes on to let him stay for some time. The sparks start to fly when her sisters, find out and deeper questions of identity, and whether her sisters have ever really accepted her, come to the fore. Being so realistic, it was a play which left urgent questions suspended, literally hanging in the air. For me, an already powerful play became dazzling when performed beneath *Suspended* and having spoken to cast members afterwards, they spoke of how performing the play in that particular context really heightened their experience.

Of course, the very title *The Host* has another deeper context for us here. The host is the wafer we hold up, bless, break and share whenever we celebrate the Eucharist. The host is Christ, who instituted this sacrament of communion at the last supper, the night before he died, in the story we rehearse around the altar together every Sunday. In our Eucharist today Christ is both host and guest and the act of sharing in this holy feast is a moment of transfiguration when we remember the deeper reality in which we set our faith; that when we share the bread and wine we step into the eternal now and are joined with the whole company of heaven – not just saints and angels, but all those who have gone before us and those yet to come. In that moment we are linked in and through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit with those we have loved and lost - with baby

Rowan and many more - and those as yet unborn.

One of the things I will miss most about *Suspended*, and which I know I will be most aware of next time I celebrate the Eucharist here in our main Sunday service is the moment when as priest, we elevate the host, when we hold up the wafer as we recall Christ's words: 'Take, eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' For during the past 8 weeks, whenever I've held that wafer up, I've found it perfectly superimposed itself right in front of the globe-shaped light right in the middle, in the very heart of *Suspended*, that globe-shaped collection of clothes and those two deep realities - the suffering endured by thousands of refugees and the suffering of Christ as he gives himself for all on the cross for love: a terrible beauty. I know that is a sight and an experience that will stay with me for many more Eucharists, even though *Suspended* has now left the building.

As we enter Lent this week, we will continue to live with the questions *Suspended* has

brought into our midst. As we do so, may we carry with us our own experiences of transfiguration, however fleeting; moments when we experience a glimpse of God's glory, a vision of the world as it could be; a vision of the kingdom that is to come; a vision in which the world does not have to be a certain way because that's the way it's always been.

And so let us pray:

*Take us to the mountain, Holy One,
from where our limited human perspective
can catch a glimpse
of the healing of the nations that you desire.
Help us listen to you and to the cries of your
children in need.*

*Then, Lord, lead us back down, and
transfigure us
to be your face and hands to all in need, that
together,
we may transform our world into a place of
peace, freedom, and human dignity,
through Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

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