



when God is silent and the wind is shrill

Last Saturday it was sunny. Hot. I spent the day in a beautiful garden in Cambridge with a group of people from different faith backgrounds, most of whom I didn't know, who had been convened by Rowan Williams to listen to a conversation. The day was so beautiful and Cambridge so tranquil, that the exchanges we were listening to seemed almost other-worldly, so incongruous were they to our surroundings.

A young woman called Sandrine was talking to an older man Jean Pierre. Jean Pierre is a Tutsi survivor of the Rwandan genocide: his parents, family, and many friends were hacked to death during 100 days in the summer of 1994 when a million Tutsis were murdered in a killing spree by Hutus.

Sandrine is the daughter of a Hutu general, who was jailed for his part in the oversight of the massacre of Tutsis, although she protests his innocence. She now lives in Belgium, in some kind of exile from her homeland, working with young Rwandans on reconciliation and peace projects.

The gathering was part of a series of dialogues called the Inspire Dialogues, whose conviction is that while we often rush to judgement about saying "what can we do" in the face of atrocities, that sometimes, what we can do is listen, talk, dare to engage, try to speak.

Its conviction therefore is that talking is not cheap, it is costly. And it's a place to start.

Sandrine and Jean Pierre spoke slowly, both speaking in their second or third language, but deliberately and with emotion that neither of them could conceal or reduce. It was hard to listen; harder still to think of something to say, something to ask; I felt as if I was drawing near a burning building; the heat of it threatened to burn my face, and

the people inside were looking out at me, an accused bystander, as well as trying to speak to each other.

After this service today, the group that went from this church to Berlin, Krakow and Nuremberg this summer will be showing some pictures and telling some stories. Although 29 of us went, it was a whole-church endeavour, and many of you came to the preparation meetings without coming on the trip itself. We'd really like to share with you something of what we experienced so do please stay if you can. As a group, we went to Auschwitz and Birkenau and tried to face together the horror, the bleakness, the nihilism of Nazi ideology that caused one set of human beings to murder 6 million other human beings with an industrialised killing machinery that left many of us feeling disorientated, sick. We will talk to you about how we experienced that in our session after the service.

Earlier this year I visited Syria for 8 days; travelling through the Syrian desert on a bus with armed guards to the front and back, knowing that at one point, ISIS strongholds were on one side and Jabat al Nusra were on the other. Being bombed throughout the 8 days by no fewer than 6 countries; UK, US, France, Israel, Russia and the Syrian government. Listening to the stories of former residents of Eastern Ghouta, listening to the intense trauma and mess of a population in the middle of a war, with very little hope, with trust destroyed. And now back in London - listening to the news and thinking that President Bashar al Asaad is about to commit a further atrocity, with Russian assistance, in the province of Idlib. And there is nothing anyone is going to do to stop it. I have myself struggled to find words for that experience, visiting a society and a

county which is in the middle of its own nightmare, exhausted population, brutalised young people.

Rwanda, Auschwitz, Syria. Names that in our generation are freighted with a toxic symbolism that will linger for as long as we are alive and beyond.

Chemical weapons, gas chambers, machetes. It is hard to face the depravity to which human beings can sink. To which, I have to face, perhaps I could sink.

I am speaking about bleak subjects in this sermon – and sermons are supposed to be about preaching good news. But I will not, because I think the gospel does not, offer bland assurances that everything will be all right, because it patently isn't.

But I think I can offer, rooted in this same gospel, a sense of hope.

In the Scriptures themselves, this morning, we had a dose of realism and a refusal to over-spiritualise what are the truths about human life in the world.

We are continuing to read through the Book of Acts before the service - and today we heard the beginnings of a conspiracy against Stephen: who was clearly an astonishing person; kind, full of the Spirit, brave. He was a leader of a group of 7 who were specifically tasked with serving the poorest people in 1st century Jerusalem; women whose husbands had died and who were themselves destitute. We hear the religious leaders beginning to plot his destruction in our reading today. They "stirred up the people" we heard. Then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, brought him before the council.

This is a familiar story told in the years before World War Two. The people were "stirred up" with disgusting anti-Semitic propaganda in newspapers, Nazi leaflets, book burnings, famously Kristallnacht in 1938. In 1994, incitement against Tutsis was stirred up amongst Hutus by a dedicated radio station, broadcasting filth and lies about Tutsis, calling them cockroaches and declaring them sub human. And while in Syria, I watched a propaganda film made by the Deputy

Speaker of the Syrian Parliament which left me feeling physically sick. Public executions, chemical weapons attacks, the dehumanising of a whole generation reminded me again that the first casualty of war is truth.

And in the gospel today Jesus tries to explain that he will be killed for what he is teaching. Despite being as plain as this, the reaction of his closest followers is to be arguing along the way who is the most important among themselves.

TS Eliot had it right when he commented "humankind cannot bear too much reality".

And in the face of this reality, is this gospel really adequate? Is it really adequate in the face of the torture and cruelty of Auschwitz, Rwanda, Syria? Jesus gets a child and puts the child in front of the crowd and says to the rest of us – you have to accept the kingdom of God like a child.

Really?

Surely these toxic places are no places for children. And yet.

One million children under 16 were murdered in the Holocaust. Young ones were sent to the gas chambers holding their mothers' hands so they didn't cry.

In the 100 days of the Rwandan genocide, 53.7% of the million killed were children and young people under 24. It is difficult to establish the proportion of boys to girls, but it is known that there were orders to kill boys, to the point that some dressed up as girls to try and survive.

And in Syria, the use of barrel bombs by the regime and Russia has led to estimates that from 2013 onwards, 1 in 4 civilian deaths have been and continue to be children under 16.

These places are no places for children. But in one of the appalling barrack rooms in Birkenau, paintings survive from adults waiting to be sent to the gas chamber, of large scale figures of children on their way to school. Ordinary children, painted by their parents trying to humanise an inhumane

environment, trying to comfort and entertain children who were similarly about to die.

One of the common threads between these experiences of Syria, Auschwitz and Rwanda infused with the gospel stories is that of imagination, and how our imaginations serve us in the service of the gospel, bringing good news into a bleak world.

Our group which went to Auschwitz did so for as many reasons as there were people. Everyone who went went as an individual and I wouldn't presume to speak for any of them. Why we took this group as a church though, I can speak about. And some of it was to do with the church's historic vocation, rooted in the gospel, to be witnesses. And to take steps to create witnesses. Which requires only two things.

First that you are willing to travel. You are willing to put your body into a different place; you are willing to go there, stand there, move yourself so that you see things differently, witness to what you see.

And second that you are willing to try to imagine the experience of the other.

We are rightly schooled these days not to commit the cardinal sin of platitudes to suffering people. When you are in the middle of your own suffering almost the worst thing anyone can say is "I know how you feel". On a personal level, this platitude often elicits a rage and a fury – how can you possibly know? Don't you dare. How can you presume to know? Stop it. Don't.

That's really true and important.

But an exchange last Saturday made me think about this a bit differently. One person in our group was being very careful to say to the Rwandan guests – I can't possibly imagine how you feel, how it was. And to this everyone nodded. Because that's what you're supposed to say.

But one of the youngest people there – a theatre director in his 20s - challenged this. "I don't think that's good enough" he said. "Maybe we can't imagine what it was like." He said. "But I really think we should try".

And I felt that he had taught me something by saying this.

One of the themes of our trip to Germany and Poland was reflecting on the very difficult decisions we have to make about how to remember; how not to forget the lessons; how to work now to try to prevent such cruelty again.

Of course it was hard to look at the piles of shoes and suitcases at Auschwitz. But as one commentator has said

In a perversely ironic twist, these artefacts – collected as evidence of the crimes – were forcing us to recall the victims as the Nazis have remembered them to us: in the collected debris of a destroyed civilisation. Armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction. In great loose piles, these remnants remind us not of the lives once animating them, so much as the brokenness of lives now scattered in pieces Young James E., in Weiss Ann, *The last album: eyes from the ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2001, pp. 16-18

These debates will continue about how to remember the dead. But from the gospel point of view, if Jesus is saying anything approaching what we think he might be saying, then he is valuing the child-like (not childish but child-like) capacity for 2 things; imagination and asking questions:

Of course it's not possible to know another person's experience – either joyful or desolate. And so we can't claim that knowledge.

But even to travel to Auschwitz-Birkenau, or to sit in courtroom 600 in Nuremberg means that you who went and you who supported us were part of a commitment to create witnesses; to face something hard together. And to be willing to try to imagine what the real human beings experienced. And in doing that, face our own capacity for depravity and our own capacity for honourable action too.

And, like a child, to keep asking questions – especially the question that all young children ask a lot – why.

I've spoken before about the fact that too many of us do our faith mostly in our heads; we easily get stuck there. But Christianity is not primarily a set of doctrines to assent to. It is a life to be lived. Messily, full of mistakes, getting a lot wrong, often desperate for forgiveness, often longing for love.

Where are the places that you can go to – actually go to – that will change your perspective, and fertilise your imagination? Where is it that you can put your body so that you witness a different reality, learn more about what it's like to be human and learn more about where God is in the world.

And are you prepared to keep asking, for your whole life, keep asking *why?* without giving in to despair?

Are you willing to try to imagine another's experience, not just the victims but the perpetrators. Not just the Jews but the Nazis. Not just the Tutsis but the Hutus. Not just the civilians but the men in the forces suppressing Syria's population in the name of the Assad regime?

Because if we stay away, try to convince ourselves in some way that by doing that we stay pure, then we are not able to live the gospel we proclaim. Our own shame is the seedbed for our redemption. Our own

shame is precisely the place where God meets us in the crucified Christ, murdered by frightened politicians and religious elites, the roots of whose fear is in every one of us here.

And so we commit to listen, to imagine, to pray. Because in all these crucibles of suffering, past and present, truly listening and imagining is not primarily about us. It is a gift, perhaps the only gift at this distance, that we can give to the ones who died and are dying. That they remain and will always be for us, mysterious, precious souls, not statistics, that we have tried to meet, tried to hear. And that they are precious to us because they are precious to God. And we will remain forever shocked, forever stricken, forever shaken, that this cruelty is part of our humanity. Part of us.

And like a child, we will live the lives we have been given, attentive to the possibilities of justice offered in the kingdom of God playfully, joyfully, quick to cry tears of solidarity, but always asking why. And acting every day, every minute of every day, to help make the world more just, more kind, more shaped like the life of Christ.

Let us pray

Eternal God, hold us through the age long minute. When you are silent and the wind is shrill.

Amen.

Lucy Winkett