

WHERE ARE YOUR WOUNDS?

Trinity XV

St Michael Cornhill

Sung Eucharist

Sunday September 4th 2016

© The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

As an impressionable young man – still in my late teens, I remember reading Alan Paton’s novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. It remains one of my all-time great novels and I’ve read it at least once more since those days. Paton was a liberal-minded South African of English pedigree who ran Deepkloof Reformatory in Natal. The novel captures the agonies of a country riven by racial tension and hatred. One of my most vivid memories is of a passage where a black man and a white man were talking together of the horrors of apartheid.

On entering heaven God had addressed the two South Africans with the simple question: ‘Where are your wounds?’ One of the men replied ‘I have no wounds.’ God replied ‘And was there nothing worth fighting for?’ God replied. It is a telling exchange and could be applied to so many different situations. Currently, our present world offers perhaps multiple places – far more than even in the 1950s and 60s when Paton was writing his novel.

But the encounter of these two men resonates immediately with the roots of the Christian life. For with Jesus, it is the wounds that are one of the most powerful signs or indicators of the nature of the true life. One of the most remarkable facets of the life of Jesus, as we know it, however, was that - despite his wounds – he refused to use violent language, to push himself forward, or – even in the trials before Pilate and the High Priest, to answer back. For much of the time he keeps a strong and dignified silence. The only exception to this is in the cleansing of the Temple when he is angered by humanity’s greed and self-centredness.

In the light of this, our three lessons today are not easy reading. Indeed they are challenging. Ecclesiasticus, or *Ben Sirach* warns against pride. Human pride equals sin. The rulers, the powerful, all driven by an inflated ego are castigated. *Pride* is the enemy. The Letter to the Hebrews strikes a milder note, but only because it describes the opposite side of the coin, of a life lived *without pride*. ‘Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares.’ So an encouragement to *unselfing* continues – remember those in prison, keep free from the love of money, be generous to others before you think of yourselves

The gospel, however, returns us to a sterner approach. It’s the parable of those invited to the banquet. The most famous cliché garnered from this tale is the response, ‘Friend, come up higher.’ The message again is don’t push yourselves forward. When you give a banquet, ‘invite the poor, the cripples, the lame, the blind’, and so on.

But how is this achieved? Is it simply a matter of *boot-lace-ology* – grit your teeth and try harder. That certainly wasn’t the example of Christ. It was not about him pushing himself, as we’ve seen. Similarly, it is not all about *us* and *doing*. Instead, remember – very early on in the gospel, Jesus goes out into a desert place amongst the wild beasts. There he stays, we’re told, for forty days and forty nights, not *doing* but *praying* and remaining open to the Father, to the grace of God. What does that mean for us?

When I was teaching at the theological college in Lincoln, we invited Rabbi Lionel Blue to lead a Quiet Day. This was before he ‘became famous’ as one might say. One reflection he made, then, I particularly remember. He said, referring to those in training: ‘As ministers of religion, people will, I think, be expecting us to give them *security*, but I think we have something rather different to offer, and that is *courage*.’ They were telling words then, as they are now. Christianity

is not about anything for a quiet life, nor is it about more prosperous lives – nor is it about working for our own salvation, more pulling up by our own bootlaces. That will only turn us back in on ourselves.

So what is our starting point for such unselfing? The answer is none other than where we are at this moment. The starting point must be worship and contemplation. That's the same place in which Jesus began his ministry. For in worship and contemplation we are automatically pointed outwards, away from ourselves and towards God. Only then, do pride and selfishness melt away

The late Bernard Levin, a doyen among journalists captured this perfectly in a review-article. A priest is preaching to a crowd. Levin reflects: ‘. . . had the priest turned his back upon the crowd, attending only to the divine sun which seizes and holds his gaze, they might have come up quietly behind him, knelt down – looking where *he* looks – and forgotten all their care, their troubles. It might be said that the basic command of religion is not “Do this!” or “Do not do that!” but simply “Look!” The rest follows.’

It is very unfashionable advice. Silence, prayer, worship and contemplation are minority activities. Small numbers, relatively, spend an hour of their Sunday in church. But that does not say they're wrong, misguided or naïve. Instead, counter-cultural as it seems, they point to the One without whom we would not be here, without whom life cannot prosper. The message is clear – more time with God, not just an hour on a Sunday even, lies at the heart. Laugh at us, or even pity us, as some people may, it is ultimately this that gives depth to our world. Worship, has no utilitarian base – worship and contemplation are, literally *useless*. But they give to our civilisation the depth it needs to survive and thrive – and that is none other than our God himself!

Amen.

Readings:

Ecclesiasticus 10. 12-18.

Hebrews 13. 1-8, 15-16.

Luke 14. 1, 7-14.