

**Sermon: Sexagesima 2011      Who going through the vale of misery shall use it for a well...**

I should like to use today's sermon to cheer you up with a verse from Psalm 84: *who going through the vale of misery shall use it for a well*. So let me add to your joy this morning by speaking about pain, unhappiness and misery. These things are undeniable facts of life – though, human beings being what we are, we do try to deny them. We certainly try to avoid suffering at all costs. There are even official philosophies to teach us how to avoid pain, unhappiness and misery.

Principal among these philosophies is utilitarianism which is based on the idea that the purpose of life is to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. Its first exponent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Jeremy Bentham who invented something called the Utilitarian Calculus. You are meant to do your sums to work out how to enjoy life to the full. For example, should I go to the pictures to see *The King's Speech* or stay in and watch *Strictly Come Dancing*? This is where we start to do our sums, to give these alternative activities points. So one point for the pictures would be the promise of an inspiring tale, another point for good acting, another point for the fact that it features our friends the Drapers' hall.

On the other side of the equation, *Strictly Come Dancing* might score a point for the pretty dresses and another for the exciting music, yet another for the joy of watching Ann Widdecombe. It gets more complicated, this Utilitarian Calculus. I must deduct a point from the pictures if it's raining, and I can add a point for staying in and watching the telly because then I can enjoy a beer.

Other philosophers have suggested to Jeremy Bentham that there must be more to life than pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance. Nietzsche, for instance, despised Utilitarianism and called it *pig philosophy*. Utilitarianism is all about *quantity* of life. It refuses to discuss *quality*. And many will say this is its weakness, this is why it is inadequate as a philosophy of life. If all you measure is quantity you will always end up just wanting more. The problem with living only to enjoy pleasure and avoid pain is because it results in our refusing to face half of life's reality. And the unpleasant fact for even the sunniest optimist is that pains will come one day whether we try to avoid them or not. Surely we need to develop a more realistic, one might say more mature, attitude towards pain, unhappiness and misery?

One such noble attempt to face the fact of pain was that of Zeno and Epictetus, whom we call *Stoics*. The Stoics believed that everything which happens is predetermined, so the best policy is for the individual is to learn acceptance of inevitability. There is a very dark side to this teaching but at its best it praises fortitude, courage and longsuffering in the face of pain and suffering. Stoicism teaches that, since we cannot control the world, we must learn to control ourselves, our emotions. There is a touching modern story about a City man who loved his wife

dearly for many years. She died suddenly. It was said that as the City man got on the train that morning, people might just have noticed that his hat was not on quite perfectly and that the crease in his copy of *The Times* not so well-marked. They would have noticed nothing more uncontrolled than these trifles. The last line in the story is: *the noble Epictetus could not have hoped for more.*

Before we go on, we must pause to see that there are different sorts of suffering: deserved and undeserved. If I burgle a house I should expect to be punished. If you drink too much, you have earned the hangover. But the sudden onset of leukaemia, or being in the middle of Christchurch New Zealand this week are obviously different. St Peter spells out the moral consequences precisely:

*For what glory is it if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye take it patiently? But if, when ye do well and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God*

So St Peter says that we must accept with patience even that suffering which is undeserved. The modern, utilitarian, secular mind recoils from this as barbarous, offensive and an insult. And his cry goes up like that of any child in the playground, *It's not fair!* No life isn't fair. But it's what we do when faced with its unfairness which reveals the sorts of characters we are.

So far, so good. But the Psalmist goes much further. *Who going through the vale of misery shall use it for a well.* He says it's not enough to be stoical in the face of suffering, taking it on the chin, the stiff upper lip and all that. The Psalmist tells us to do something which is both terrifying and sublime at the same time. We are to use our misery as a well. This is revolutionary. This is profound. This is utterly shocking. He is saying that pain, unhappiness and misery are there for a purpose. They are to be used. But look, he goes even much further than that. His choice of metaphor is astounding. Misery is a well. Misery is water. And water is the first necessity for life. So is misery is also a necessity for life. The supreme sign of this is of course the water of baptism in which we are baptised into Christ's death so that we may be raised with him.

Christianity teaches us that suffering is redemptive. Well, we know that Christ suffered for our redemption. But the faith goes deeper and claims that within *our* suffering there is the possibility of redemption. An example of it in the obituary column only this week: *Chris Buckingham suffered years in a Japanese prisoner of war camp and the experience convinced him his vocation was to become a doctor.*

Let me take you in your imagination to a vale. It is surrounded by tall, dry cliffs. *Here is no water but only rock. Rock and no water and the sandy road, The road winding above among the mountains, which are mountains of rock without water...* A woman walks along that dry road. She is carrying a pale. She is looking for water. She is hot and dry. She is miserable. Then in this

misery what? – at last she comes to a well. And the water she collects from this well is not just for herself but she takes it back to her family and her neighbours.

Pain, unhappiness, misery are mysteries which lie in the depths. They are terrible but they bring with them the chance of transformation. When pain makes us realise that life is not just a bowl of cherries, one long ride on the roundabout, we are at least given the opportunity to see into deeper meaning and significance. Intense suffering – like that of Dr Chris Buckingham – can change us for the better. In fact the change can be so tremendous, the revelation so blinding, as to amount to a vision of the Divine. Of course it does not always work out like that. We don't like the harsh lesson which suffering teaches and so we recoil, we complain it's not fair, we sulk and we whimper to have our toys back.

There is more. The transforming power of suffering has the capacity to redeem not just my own life but to revolutionise the way I think of others. I have observed that it is often those who have suffered most who are most sympathetic to the sufferings of others. For love is compassion – that is *feeling with*.

*The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part;  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer's art*

It is the experience of our own suffering which startles us into the realisation that other people's pain is real like ours. Suffering is the means by which God encourages us to love our neighbour.

It doesn't always work out like this with us. We are not natural heroes. So we must pray for courage. In the end, the suffering of Christ and our sufferings are one and the same. The saints are those who know this, accept it and rejoice in it. There is a choice. Either we regard pain and suffering as the very worst that can happen to us or we ask to receive the courage to work some redemption out of these horrors. To try to do this is to follow where Jesus Christ went before us.

That Psalm which I took as my text also promises comfort and redemption:

*Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee: in whose heart are thy ways. Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well....They will go from strength to strength: and unto the God of gods appeareth every one of them in Sion... O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer: hearken O God of Jacob...Behold O God my defender: and look upon the face of thine anointed.*