

Good Friday

to touch

“..we were made for these times..”

On 1st Sunday of Advent 2019 I had two pastoral letters to share with parishioners of Our Lady and St Benedict's Ampleforth; one from Bishop Terence Patrick introducing the Year of the Word..the other different, a profound sense of an anticipation of what was to come..to become..the Word becoming flesh..the preamble to the Incarnation in four weeks time..this pastoral letter was 13 days old so straw was still warm..

I read it as a minor piece of distant news was emerging from China of a new virus emanating from cases of pneumonia in Wuhan Province..this is what I wrote;

“..the second pastoral letter spoke sufficiently powerfully to me for me to want to share its wisdom with you as we begin our journey towards the manger together..”so stay awake!” no question of you falling asleep..authors name gives spice from the start..Clarissa Pinkola Estes “we were made for these times” written 13 days ago so straw is still warm..

“my friends, do not lose heart. We were made for these times. I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in our world now. Ours is a time of almost daily astonishment, and often righteous rage over the latest degradations of what matters to civilised, visionary people. You are right in your assessments; the lustre and hubris some have aspired to while endorsing acts so heinous against children, elders, everyday people, the poor the unguarded, the helpless is breathtaking. Yet, I urge you, ask you, gentle you, to please not spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times. Especially do not lose hope. Most particularly because, the fact is we were made for these times. Yes, for years we have been learning, practising, been in training for, and just waiting to meet on this exact plain of engagement.

I grew up on the Great Lakes and recognise a seaworthy vessel when I see one. Regarding awakened souls, there have never been more able vessels in the waters than there are right now across the world; and they are fully provisioned and able to signal one another as never before in the history of humankind. Look out over the prow; there are millions of righteous souls on the waters with you. Even though your veneers may shiver from every wave in this stormy roil, I assure you that the long timbers composing your prow and rudder come from a greater forest. That long-grained lumber is known to withstand storms, to hold together, to hold its own and to advance, regardless. In any dark time there is tendency to veer towards fainting over how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus on that. There is a tendency too, to fall into being weakened by dwelling on what is outside your reach, by what you cannot yet be. Do not focus there. That is spending the wind without raising the sails.

We are needed, that is all we can know; and though we meet resistance, we more so will meet great souls who will hail us, love us and guide us, and we will know them when they appear. Didn't you say you were a believer? Didn't you say you pledged to listen to a voice greater?

Didn't you ask for grace? Don't you remember that to be in grace means to submit to the voice greater?

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portions of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip towards an enduring good. What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to and adding more continually. We know that it doesn't need everyone on earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small determined group who will not give up during the first, second or hundredth gale.

One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. Soul on deck shines like gold in dark times; the light of the soul throws sparks, can send up flares, builds signal fires, causes proper matters to catch fire. To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these; to be fierce and to show mercy towards others; both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity.

Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it; if you would help to calm the storm, this is one of the strongest things you can do. There will always be times when you feel discouraged. I too have felt despair many times in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it. I will not entertain it; it is not allowed to eat from my plate. The reason is this; in my uttermost bones I know something, as you do. It is that there can be no despair when you remember why you came to earth, who you serve, and who sent you here. The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours. They are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall; When a great ship is in harbour and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for."

"..come..know the time has come..so stay awake" and now let us set sail into our Advent..

[1st Sun Advent YrA ; Mt 24; 37-44]

"stay awake" the cry of Advent..and last night didn't Our Lord caution his disciples as they entered Gethsemane, and his greatest human moment of despondency and despair was imminent.. "wait here and keep awake with me"..

"Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach." Stretching out to "touch" to mend the part of the world that is within our reach..Good Friday 15 April 2022..

One of most moving images from Ukraine so far has been to see station platforms teeming with thousands of refugees desperate to get onto trains making for Poland or Moldova..of a young perhaps 6yr old child at carriage window with the palm of their hand pressed up against glass, and from platform, their bereft father staying behind to fight for their country, puts the palm of his hand onto window overlaying that of his child's..a touch ever to be remembered..intimate, deeper than words, the steady look between them reminding me of rich young man just before Jesus was to ask him, what he was, on that platform, asking last

month of the father..remember? “there is one thing you lack; go, sell all you own, give the money to the poor, then come follow me”..put your family onto a train to safety, into caring hands and loving hearts of these Polish and German brothers and sisters of mine, where they will be welcomed, looked after, invited into fullness of their lives and homes as if myself..then take up your Cross and your rifle and come follow me..and what gave the weeping mother and her children the courage to let go in love?..what gave the father courage loyalty and the love to trust in the impossible?..it was the look of love...the eye to eye contact held steadily bravely intimately, between father and son/daughter never to be forgotten.. “he looked steadily at him and loved him” ..train leaves and on platform, the fathers now, each alone distant, and with eyes like waterfalls..”my soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here and keep awake with me”..

Fr Donal O’Leary of Leeds Diocese wrote in his book “Already Within” a chapter called “Touch of the Divine”

“I have often marvelled at the power of touch. How much emotion it releases, how much healing it brings. Any parent who has picked up their tired, tense and factious children will know the soothing power of holding them closely to their breast. Skin has to be touched, arms are for holding. Sr Mary told me about the boy who rushed up to her in the playground claiming to have fallen and hurt his knee. After close inspection she suggested that he made up the story. “well, sister” the disgruntled pupil muttered “couldn’t you give it a rub anyway?”

Story of fearful child who, during the night, called out for his mother. She came into his room and searched the dark wardrobe to put his mind at rest. He would not be consoled. She checked for small lurking monsters under the bed, all to no avail. She spoke to him about the protection of angels and of the presence of God all around him. He still refused to be satisfied. Unknowingly echoing the deepest desire within all creation, he blurted out “I want something with skin on!”.

..we have a fully divine Jesus taking 33yrs among us learning to become fully human; you and I fully human, taking 18yrs or 80yrs..a lifetime learning to become fully divine..Jesus learned to live fully in his body, he embraced young and old, allowed John to recline on his breast, Mary Magdalen [the Apostle to the Apostles] to kiss his feet and wipe them with her hair. He reached for his special friends in most human ways and hungered as we do for intimacy, and in doing so he, and now us, enflesh and reveal true nature of God incarnate.. ..some years ago young lad in St Benedict’s Primary School where I was Chaplain for 9yrs as Parish Priest, came forward, along with 72 other young disciples, at our Ash Wednesday Mass for the imposition of ashes..a most moving liturgy, to trace sign of Cross onto forehead of penitent follower of Jesus, and to look into their eyes and see the face of God..he remembered it and next time I was in School he came up to me, reached up and gave me sign of Cross on my forehead..6yrs old..often it continued to the embarrassment of his Mum I suspected..a week last Sunday I celebrated Mass here for a congregation of perhaps 300 after Leavers Ball in College night before..I went into Newman Room for coffee afterwards and here he was now a grown up 12yr old and over coffee, among room packed with people, he

came up to me and gave me the sign of Cross on my forehead with one of his trademark smiles to die for..

“do this in memory of me”

..a moment now to remember, make present again, one of most intimate moments in story of Our Lord’s Passion, when one of his closest followers touched him with his lips..”greetings Rabbi” and kissed him”..Judas could have pointed a finger of identification to the snatch-squad sent by chief priests and scribes..he could have voiced the betrayal..but he kissed him..kissed him..a gesture of intimacy, often practised by Pope Francis particularly in presence of wounded vulnerable diseased..and Jesus’ response to his beloved Judas? “my friend, do what you are here for”..my friend, always my friend, not in spite of, but deeply because of your betrayal your infidelity your disowning me..my friend..why did he do it?..why?..

..and the next day “his betrayer was filled with remorse, and took the 30 pieces of silver back to the chief priests and scribes”..a prodigal son a coming to one’s sense’s moment ..”I have sinned I have betrayed innocent blood”

and he got short shrift “what is that to us? that is your concern” and in our Catholicism today is it any different?..those of us in all sorts of difficulties breakdowns addictions and the paperwork goes to Rome, rather like visa applications go up to Priti Patel, and sit on a monsignors mahogany desk in Vatican, or on a civil servants mahogany desk in Whitehall for weeks, until a non answer is decreed “no”..and no appeal “Roma locuta causa finita” [Rome has spoken, the matter is closed]..how many victims do we know of religious bureaucracy?..and flinging down the silver pieces in the sanctuary, he made off and went and hanged himself” why have we always been led to believe it was a gesture of anger when he could have thrown them down in self disgust..bereft lonely, when “no one offered him anything” not a word or a touch of a gesture of belonging, like a sign on piece of cardboard on concourse in Cologne Stn [notice not in St Pancras]..which instead of reading “2 or 3..short term or long term” and with a love heart on it..might have read /copied two phrases Jesus possibly wrote in sand with his finger [finger] in front of woman caught in adultery, when the squeaky clean voices of religious authority called for the instigation of clause 42 subsection 3 of the Code of Canon Law 2018..and instead Jesus wrote in sand, thoughtfully respectfully lovingly with the words facing the woman, the first time “forgiven” and second time? “ my beloved, and for always”..

..and where is Judas now?..I ask my Yr 12 students who come here on retreat from schools across the north..hell purgatory or heaven?..and they ask me all sorts of questions, not from theology book but from their hearts “is there an unforgivable sin?”..I give them a starter for ten and 55mins later they give me the answer to their question.

“..and he kissed him tenderly”

touch..”if I can touch even the hem of his garment, I shall be well again..”

wonderful book published 2009 by Continuum called “Stations of the Cross” by Sara Maitland..she practices lectio divina on the story of Holy Week and sensitively sacredly weaves facts in scripture with her musings, evidently inspired by the Holy Spirit, to bring each story each Station alive..the woman with haemorrhage is Veronica, who wipes, who touches, the face of Jesus..

..you will sense..touch into..the similarities between her story then and her uncleanness, and ours now, and our spiritual covid..our continuing spiritual long covid..

“I look down, casually, from the roof at the crowd who are packed into the street below..avid, eager, greedy as people can be greedy for the shame of others. I may even have been thinking “someone else’s turn”. I know that avid, prurient curiosity all too well. I look down and my heart stops because I can see it is him. I do not want it to be him; I do not want to be called back into memory. This is my first visit to Jerusalem. I am free; I can go about in the crowd without having to take responsibility for their danger of contamination; I can walk freely..I can praise God in his own house, and receive guests in mine. After 12yrs I am free; and I do not want to go back into the shame. But it is him. I cannot help remembering. His shame and the mood of the crowd are too precise, too like mine; I cannot just put aside all those 12yrs and forget.

Wrapped in the bloody rags of my shame, exhausted by all the washing and changing, embarrassed by the knowledge that my neighbours all knew, worn out by the curse on me, I staggered up the crowded street in Capernaum just as he staggers up this one. He is bleeding; I was bleeding.

Each time I went down to the washing place, I could see the gossips eyeing me with a delicate and half-discreet curiosity, a kind of tender fearfulness. I hated it and I had to go; if I could have afforded to, I would have burned my soiled clothes and kept to the privacy of my own house, but untouchable, unmarriageable, defiled and defiling, always unclean. I would spend money on doctors who would hardly bear to touch me, who would blame me and fear me, and who would not help me. 12yrs..4,3890 days.

Each morning I would have to strip off the blood-stained linen cloths and wrap on clean ones. Each morning I would examine my conscience, carefully going through each space of time across my whole life to find out what I had done that I should be so punished. I had not been one jot more sinful than other women who now had four or even seven sons...and as I walked as privately as I could through each day, I could feel my rage growing heavy, sodden with loss; and my own body daily less fed, less rounded, less beautiful. Bitterness flowed in to fill the spaces where blood flowed out.

I heard that he healed by touching. He would not touch me. I knew he would not touch me. He would ask what healing I needed and I would have to tell him, and he would pull back, disgusted, and he would not touch me. If he knew, he would not touch me. I didn’t have the gall to ask, I could not face the shame of him refusing to touch me.

But one morning, I was standing in my doorway looking out at the lake, a beautiful morning with the lake sparkling and bright, the great stretch of water that moves and shimmers, moody vast and clean. There was a boat, just an ordinary fishing boat, clearly putting in to our harbour. It wasn’t a local boat, and it was surprisingly full of people. They were making an awkward job of tacking her under sail in the light breeze. The street was full of people,

pushing down to the waterfront, there was a sort of excitement, and finally I understood that it was him, the Teacher, and that they were coming ashore here. I could not let the chance go. I would not ask him to touch me. I would just touch him; touch a bit of his cloak or something. For the first time in years I had what I recognised as hope. I was hopeful that he might heal me if I just touched the hem of his cloak.

The crowd was dense, I was not used to it; I had lived alone for a long time. What kept me going was anger. Anger can give you courage; I was so angry at my whole, wasted, horrible life; at all these people who ignored me, and at God. Let them all be defiled, I thought; let them be contaminated, forced out, untouchable, unwanted. Let them feel what it's like. I was tired of being ashamed. I was tired of helping other people to make me ashamed in order to protect them from their shame. I was going to do what I had to do, and he could like it or lump it.

When I touched his long cloak the bleeding stopped. I knew in my body that I was healed. But when he turned and asked who had touched him I wanted to die. I knew I should not have been there, defiling the whole community with the filth of my womanhood. I was frightened. I could not breathe; I could not think, panic strangled me. I started to sweat and blush; a great tide of blood swept up through my whole body, the hotness and the redness of blood covering me all over as though it had broken through the cloths and would run out and contaminate the whole world..and he reached out and took me into his arms. He held me. No one had held me, or touched me, for 12years. He held me close and gently, his arms wrapped firmly round me with my head against his shoulder, protecting me, covering my shame with his cloak. He held me.

When I touched his cloak, I knew in my body that I was healed. Women have talked to me about quickening, about the mysterious beautiful moment when you child first moves deep in your belly..it was like that. When I touched the hem of his cloak, something mysterious and deep in my belly, quickened and I knew that I was healed.”

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