

Third Sunday of Easter – 14 April 2024

Message – Responding to suffering

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, revealed to us through the Author of Life, open our hearts and minds, ears and eyes, to your love and grace. **Amen.**

If you are thinking that the start of today's gospel sounded a lot like last week's, you are right. Scholars have suggested several possible reasons but it seems likely Luke and John had a common source, which has been edited along the way before becoming a part of their respective gospels.

In both Luke and John's accounts, it is Christ's wounds, his hands, and feet, which reveal to the disciples that this is Jesus of Nazareth. This is their beloved teacher whom they had seen crucified. The wounds reveal continuity between Christ's pre and post resurrection body. The events of Christ's earthly ministry are an integral part of the one whom we call, the Author of Life and Christ the King.

Distinctive to Luke is an emphasis on the risen Christ's physical nature. This is no ghost or apparition. Christ has physically come back to life. To prove this, Christ eats in the presence of the disciples. Luke was writing in a context where people thought of the spirit as eternal and the body as perishable, a duality of body and spirit. We still, perhaps, tend to think in this way. Luke challenges this thinking. The body and spirit are one, the resurrection life is a physical life, our bodies matter, we do not exist without our body.

A narrow understanding of this is one reason why, in some Christian traditions, burial is preferred over cremation. Some hold that it is the physical matter of our body that will be transformed into our resurrected body. This seems to underestimate the power of God. If God sustains all things, just as creation came out of nothing so too our resurrection bodies can come out of nothing, nothing is lost in God.

The incarnation, God in human form, forces us to recognise that there is nothing inherently bad about our bodies or creation. God was here as one of us. There is no validity to the notion of the spirit being good and the body being bad. There is no such separation. The commandment to *'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind;'* is not about loving with different parts of our being but loving with our whole being: faith touches and transforms every part of our being.

Belief in a bodily resurrection, affirming the good in the physical, raises some challenging questions, particularly when we explore the theology of disability. To what extent will our resurrected bodies carry the disabilities and wounds we have in this life. If we recognise that our physical being shapes our spiritual journey, the answer is not as obvious as we might at first assumed.

Christ's resurrection body carries the visible wounds of his earthly journey through life and death. We may wish to say, but these are wounds of cosmic significance, our wounds are not of the same nature.

Our personal story of redemption may include wounding, whether visible or invisible. And, if we are truly walking in

the way of Christ, we may bear wounds that transform the lives of others too. There are no easy answers to this question. Even among, disabled theologians there is no agreement. Some assert that in their apparent disability is an essential part of their wholeness. While others are sure that they will be transformed and made whole. For some, where we see a defect, they see an essential expression our preciousness as a child of God, while others experience brokenness that needs healing.

Perhaps both are true, though beyond our understanding, both in how this can be the case and how wholeness will be achieved. Yet, we can be certain that God will bring perfect wholeness to all who faithfully follow the way of Christ.

That some people we would perceive as less than whole can say that what we perceive as brokenness brings wholeness challenges our thinking. It invites us to ask what wounds we might carry in our resurrection body, wounds that are in fact a beautiful reflection of God. It can be hard to see such possibilities because we assume what wholeness looks like. Yet, we proclaim Christ crucified and risen, the suffering saviour and God, who suffered for us.

There is some deep and perplexing way in which suffering is a part of God's good creation and not a part God avoided but rather the path God, in Christ, accepted. Christ experienced life and death in all its fullness.

We are venturing into the realms of theodicy, how a loving God can allow suffering. The Bible acknowledges suffering as a part of life. It is also clear that that suffering is only exceptionally from God and it is largely silent on why we

suffer. Suffering occurs for a wide variety of reasons. Some within human control, some far beyond our control. Though we may not understand why we suffer we can, sometimes, bring good out of our suffering.

However, in the search for reasons for suffering, we can lose sight of our gift and our calling to life in all its fullness. Rather than a theoretical explanation, the theologian John Swinton offers a practical response to suffering rooted in God's invincible and unending love for us.

Swinton invites the church to a set of practices that, in the face of suffering and evil, reflect God's love for each and every person. We start by joining others in their suffering. We are prepared to cry out with Christ, '*my God, why have you forsaken me.*' We are prepared to lament with others.

As the body of Christ, we then practice the unreasonable love of God, we repent, and wherever there is repentance, we forgive, just as Christ forgave, even from the cross.

And, we do all this in community. God has adopted us as heirs, we are bound together as family, a family that welcomes strangers, offering friendship and the possibility of healing and wholeness.

In its faltering steps, these were the practices of the early church, a response to suffering, that brings hope and wholeness. Can we reflect that same compassion, and love and so proclaim God's love to all people. I believe we can.

May God give us the courage to walk with others, to repent, to forgive, and to live in community as the family of God's adopted heirs. Amen. Amen.