

SERMON BY BISHOP PETER STUART AT THE CHRISM EUCHARIST 2013 CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL NEWCASTLE

One of the many gifts to our family from our son has been his love, while growing up, of the the Harry Potter series. Once he had been introduced to the early books he waited avidly for each new one and with enthusiasm for each film.

There are some who despise the books and films fearing that they introduce children to occult and black magic. There are others who worry about fantasy worlds and the journey back to reality. For my own part I thought the series functioned like a modern day fairy tale through which the reader was socialised to some cultural understandings. As Little Red Riding Hood highlights care of a grandparent and fear of certain people so Harry Potter introduces us to bright heroines who make an equal contribution and an understanding that wisdom is passed through the ages.

I think the most important contribution of the Harry Potter series is its openness to the question of suffering. We encounter in the stories maladies of all sorts including depression. We are introduced to a world in which there is darkness and despair.

Like all good fairy tales - when we have put the book down or stopped watching the film we are invited to review our world and think about it. We know that a couple of kids with magic wands won't overturn all that is going wrong but we are prompted to ask what will. Can our world be different and for whom?

One of the dilemmas is that we can come to expect these answers during the course of our earthly life but quickly we realise that these complex issues have affected humanity for thousands of years. The experience of suffering and evil has a centuries long pedigree. We may experience it but not overcome it. It may shape us but we may not understand it.

There will be a time when all that is created finds its fullness in God. We can catch glimpses of what that might be like but until that time we wait seeking to embody and live out the justice, peace and love which comes from God. The fullness that we encounter at that time will be not be the ultimate birthday present of all our desires. Our place, our being, our identity will be shaped by God's loving embrace of us for all eternity.

Some suffering comes from not getting all that we want. Some suffering comes from wanting to escape death. Some of our suffering comes from a focus on ourselves to the expense of others. Such suffering is meant to be for it takes us to truth rather than from it.

Some suffering comes from the vile abuse of people who use their power over others. Some suffering comes from abundant sin in greed, lust, envy and the like. Some sufferings is shaped by our inhumanity to one another and disregard for creation. Such suffering is meant to be confronted for only in the confrontation do we begin the journey to truth.

Some suffering is inexplicable in our day. It is before us as a mystery. It is a riddle to be resolved. It is a truth that remains locked. Such suffering can come from illness, pain, natural disaster or horrendous accident. This sort of suffering can haunt us and our quest for meaning.

I think one of the Western theologians who best explores this complex world of suffering is the former Archbishop of Canterbury - Rowan Williams. An Australian, Ben Myers, has

written a helpful exploration of William's theology called *Christ the Stranger*. Williams does not want to escape or ignore the tragic dimensions of human experience. He doesn't want false optimism; to whitewash or gloss over the human story. "Williams insists that God's redemptive activity does not cancel out the experience of tragedy ... Christ's resurrection does not cancel out the crucifixion but transfigures it and discloses its inner significance" according to Myers (page 94).

While I think Williams risks a pessimistic view of the world I am convince that he has grasped something here which I think is essential for priestly ministry. Our work as priests in the face of human suffering is not to cancel it out but to be agents of transfiguration and interpretation. We are not magicians who wave the magic wand and all is gone. Doctors and scientists can't and shouldn't do this and neither can we. We are and must be something else.

Let me be clear, there is some suffering that can be alleviated when the church witnesses to the Triune God of love in action - calling for mercy, visiting the needy, being present to those in prison (Luke 4: 16 - 21). Our deacons remind us of, lead us into and undertake this on our behalf. We have an imperative to name sin and seek to overcome the consequences of sin and in so doing we are bearers of God's justice and jubilee.

But we must not fall for the illusion that all suffering will end in this way. Some anguish remains long after the initial wound was inflicted. Some wounds, some losses, some scenes are almost unbearable and seem fresh every time they are remembered.

Jurgen Moltmann in his book *The Crucified God* recounts Elle Wiesel's reflections in a book called *Night*. "The SS hanged two Jewish me and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. 'Where is God?' 'Where is he?' someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice in myself answer: 'Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows' (Moltmann p 274).

The Jewish-Christian is not that God is silent to our suffering but hears our cries and experiences them deep within himself. The Christian witness is that God has become at one with the human condition and has taken the experience of degradation, humiliation, torment and pain into his being. God meets us in our pain and suffering. he is with us.

The audacious claim we make as Christian is that God has given us clear means by which his presence and companionship might be known. We are familiar with but still comprehending the mysteries by which God feeds us with bread and wine and claims us by pouring water.

Tonight we claim again that with oil made holy, God prepares the catechumen for their death in baptism, anoints the baptised, confirmed and ordained in their discipleship and comes near to the troubled, the sick and the dying. It is God's presence revealed and apprehended in the scriptures, open in prayer and touched by the sacraments that transfigures and graces suffering allowing its deeper mysteries to become real giving space for endurance, character and hope (Romans 5: 3 - 4).

At first the reality of suffering can seem to be a theological abomination which should cancel out the possibility of God but, with all of its anguish, it is perhaps suffering that invites us closer to the mystery of who God is and who we are. Needless and sinful suffering is to be

confronted but some suffering is stuff of this life and rather than be feared or hidden it is to be encountered and embraced.

And this is the work of our priests. We often make average counsellors for we have limited psychological training, we are amateur social workers and we shouldn't even try to be doctors. Our priests are bearers of faith to faith and faith to no faith. They are instruments of God for transfiguring and transforming our experience. Our priests can be asked to do all sorts of things but they most live out their priesthood when they announce in word and deed that God is near and ready us for that encounter.

It is a privilege for us to call this to mind and nurture this in our lives in this most Holy Week of the year. Tonight as four orders we gather - bishop, priest, deacon and laity. Together we are called to be ambassadors of God's reign announcing his salvation to all creation. May we make known all that God has done.