

# Lent Conversations

HOLY ROOD HOUSE



*face 2 face*

## How this Lent Conversation began

This is intended to provoke a conversation, because it is the result of a conversation, a conversation with survivors and a conversation with the gospel. It is not a final word, it is a beginning.

In writing my book 'A Spirituality of Survival' I travelled with a question, 'What does it mean to survive?' The question came with me to South Africa and to South America but it originated much closer to home amongst my work with people in Liverpool and Thirsk who have prevailed against all the odds and live to tell the tale. In Liverpool the conversation has been amongst people who survive in an urban environment, and in Thirsk it has been specifically with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

In particular a small group of people have gathered together in Thirsk to explore the gospel narrative concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus. There are so many resonances with survivor experience but also many dislocations. Was Jesus really a victim? How do we live with wounds and scars? Where is God in traumatic experiences? What does forgiveness actually mean? This Lent course has emerged from amongst these questions.

We have found the method of exploring the Biblical text that we have used to be both exciting and challenging and would want to recommend it for any group that might consider using these resources. The method we suggest is an open-ended one - that is we have not sought hard and fast conclusions but rather attempted to live a process of discovery. We had always started from real, lived, human experience and held it alongside the gospel rather than the other way around. And we have endeavoured to speak the honest truth, even though at times it has taken us to some very confusing places. We have laughed a lot and also given God a very hard time!

So here is how we suggest you approach this material.

Firstly, find a safe place to meet, somewhere to be undisturbed with plenty of room to move around. Don't squeeze into some freezing church vestry but be comfortable, and get in some food and either a bottle of wine or an efficient kettle!

Agree some ground rules. Things like 'no one will undermine or criticise anyone else, every opinion is valid' and of course agree a code of confidentiality (bearing in mind that if a child is at risk, the group is under an obligation to disclose this information).

Choose someone to be a facilitator. This can be a different person for each session. They are not a leader, but they will have responsibility to ensure that everyone in the group has space to speak. Ask someone to take some notes from the conversation.

Agree when you are going to finish, before you start!

At the beginning of each session take some time to catch up with each other, to share news and to relax. Be aware that some people will be bringing memories or secrets. Don't press anyone to disclose anything they would prefer to keep private. This is not a therapy group and it is the facilitator's job to ensure that appropriate boundaries are kept.

Each section in the course starts with a Bible passage. Read this slowly, out loud, from an inclusive version of the Bible. We have used the New RSV, you might want to use more than one version.

Now share any immediate thoughts that come to mind. In particular note any parts of the passage that have jarred with your experience or you have found challenging. Make sure that people speak straight out of their experience. Resist interpreting the text rather than saying 'Aha, so this is what Jesus meant' ask 'I wonder what Jesus meant by that?' Make sure the conversation opens up the questions rather than closing them down. Every experience is valid.

Now read through what we have written and see whether it resonates with your questions. Again, don't try to squeeze your experience into our narrative. Be open to new interpretations and the ways in which your understanding and questions are interacting with the text. Don't be afraid to disagree with us!

If the questions we have set are appropriate then choose one and work with it. You will probably not tackle them all in one night, and you may prefer to work with a different question that has come out of your conversation.

Again, ask someone to keep notes on your reflections, collecting phrases and themes rather than every detail.

You might want to conclude your evening with one of the prayers that we have included. Or you might simply want to stay quiet for a while and let the words settle with you. If anyone has had difficult memories stirred by the discussion then ensure they are alright to travel home but remember you are not counsellors. If further help is needed or you feel out of your depth, then you might encourage them to refer to one of the groups that we have highlighted eg CSSA (Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse)

or to contact the therapeutic staff at Holy Rood House. Remember, there will be survivors in any group or gathering, even if they don't tell you.

At the end of the session you might like to summarise some key themes. You could type them up and circulate them next time and if you want to post these on this website then please send them by e-mail to [face2face@holyroodhouse.org.uk](mailto:face2face@holyroodhouse.org.uk)

Remember that the intention of these sessions is to open up an honest and open-ended discussion rather than arrive at conclusions. This is not easy territory and the challenges are what bring understanding rather than the answers.

## The Garden and the Courtyard

### **Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 15:1-20**

*16 Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. 17 And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. 18 And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. 20 After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.*

These verses quoted above are difficult to read and to take in. This is abuse – pure and simple. It is pack mentality; it is person as object not human; it is strong preying on weak. It is a direct result of the decision Jesus made in the garden of Gethsemane.

In the garden Jesus is agitated and in agony – realising that he is to go on, and not run away. Knowing that living his truth means continuing on this path, whatever happens. It doesn't help me to think that Jesus chooses a way of suffering deliberately. No, Jesus chose to continue his way of truth-living – and the suffering happened as a consequence of that. Jesus had a choice – but if he was to be authentic, to be himself, in some sense he had no choice. The alternative was to run, to slip away as he had done at other times - to continue his itinerant ministry, draw people to him, to live a good, worthwhile and *inauthentic* life.

'Truth-living' for Jesus meant being authentic; continuing his way meant staying, not running, whatever the consequences – betrayal, abuse, death – because that way was actually life in fullness.

For healing to begin there is a point at which a decision has to be made – for truth-telling, truth-living – and made possibly with an inkling, but no full understanding of, the pain that might be involved in that process. We did not, do not choose our abuse, but we can choose the way to healing which is really just a choice to live authentically – to say "this is who I am, and I am choosing to live the fullness of my self."

For me the way meant remembering, telling my truth, hearing my self tell it – admitting and feeling again the betrayals, denials, humiliations and abuses. It was go through that or to settle for living a 'less than' life.

When we come to this part of Jesus' story we don't like to stay in the courtyard for long, we don't like to dwell on this part of his suffering. We can cope with him in the garden in the agony of his decision, in the court before people of power. In each of them we can find meaning, we can make some sense: although we may not understand it, we have a 'feeling' that there is sense to be made. We are so used to Jesus as subject of the sentence, as example, of his life having something meaningful to say for us.

But what of the courtyard? Jesus stripped, humiliated, abused by fellow human beings. This is the bit of human nature we don't understand and shy away from. And this part of the story we want to skip over, we don't like to think about these things – we don't want to think about this aspect of ourselves and others.

This is a meaningless act and to say other wise is to give it too much weight and importance. At first sight it seems it could be taken from the story and nothing lost. But it is there – showing our capacity for inhumanity towards others. It is easy to lose sight of Jesus here – he is simply object, he is person lost. And this abuse, this lostness, this meaninglessness is a consequence of that decision in the garden to live authentically, honestly, truthfully.

Linger for any time in the courtyard incident and we are left thinking: what is the point of that? It is particularly disturbing when we are used to finding (or at least expect to find) meaning in scripture. But here is a seemingly meaningless act: a group of soldiers abusing, humiliating a helpless man before them. It is human nature at its darkest. And as I linger in that courtyard, I am back in my own...

In memory and dream, voluntarily and involuntarily I have revisited the courtyard of my abuse experiences many times. I have relived being 'object', object of cruelty for others' seeming enjoyment, reliving the abject humiliation and lostness. I have dwelt there in ghoulis fascination; I have skipped over it; I have sat at the edge, I have denied it, I have called it the thing that makes me 'me', I have made it, and myself, meaningless.

But then, as part of my healing, I have stayed in the memory-reality of those moments. In my mind I stand and remember until it is almost unbearable and then I continue to stand, no denial, no avoidance – I stand with that child, meet her gaze, and somehow let her know that while all of this is meaningless, that does not mean that *she* is meaningless just because she is in the midst of it. She is not defined by what is happening around her, or to her.

I recently visited the Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre in Nottinghamshire. For a large part of the afternoon we listened to a man talking about his experiences of being in the concentration camps. As we listened to the worst of what people can do to each other I wondered ' why?', why do we need to hear these stories? Isn't it a kind of abuse to subject people to hearing the stories, to feeling the feelings evoked? Around the museum was information about the those who'd been involved setting up the Centre, who were survivors of the camps. The dominant message from them was: we need to keep telling the stories so that it doesn't happen again; we need to learn from history and not repeat our mistakes.

The cynic in me says: it doesn't work. Look at Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, Congo. Human nature does its thing. We haven't learnt. Survivors telling their stories doesn't stop others suffering in similar ways.

Does that mean we should give up and stop telling our stories? What is their worth? Faced with the meaningless suffering of a person at the hands of others – what do we do with it? There is a need to tell and a need to hear. But part of the uncomfortableness for me on that day is that I wanted to see this man as more than an object of horror, I wanted to hold on to his humanity, his uniqueness

We need to learn how to stay with people in the middle of their meaninglessness and not allow them to be defined by that. For me on that day at Beth Shalom I saw not the mass of six million, but individual human beings. I lingered in front of the photos of families, couples, village festivals, men chatting on street corners, and acknowledged each one – the meaning of each and their life – refusing to see them as objects. The person who told us about his experiences in the concentration camps said – his second sentence to us – “I am a product of hatred”. And he was gentle, thoughtful and sad, full of compassion, careful not to judge all Germans by the acts of some, no bitterness or desire for indiscriminate retribution was evident.

It is not just hatred that has made him how he is; just as for me it is not just abuse that has made me how I am – it is how we respond with our spirit, with our desire to live the fullness of an authentic life.

## **Questions**

1. Jesus was tortured and crucified. Did he *submit* himself to God's will or did he have some choice in this matter?
2. Survivors telling their stories doesn't necessarily prevent others from suffering in similar ways. Do you agree?
3. How do we stay with people in the midst of their meaninglessness and not allow them to be defined by that?



## Washing of Hands and Betrayal

### **Matthew 26: 47- 57 and 27: 24 – 26**

Jesus had chosen the 12 apostles, shared his life with them over three years, trusted them, revealed himself to them and loved them deeply. It is shocking therefore to read that Judas, a close and trusted friend chose to betray Jesus; it is a betrayal that has scandalised Christians for two thousand years. How could Judas hand Jesus over to be condemned and crucified? And to betray him with a kiss; it is both breathtaking and shocking.

When I was a small child I went to stay with my paternal grandparents whilst my mother was in hospital before giving birth to my younger brother. I was three. My grandfather made a great fuss of me. I had always been his favourite grandchild, the only granddaughter. He would take me into the garden and I would 'help' him with the weeding and hoeing; the earth between my fingers, the smell of the potting shed, wood and earth are memories that stay with me.

Then one day my grandfather sexually abused me. He may have abused me many times before, I have no memory, but I remember this because of the overwhelming violence of what happened, the tearing open of my body, the pain, the feeling that I am suffocating, that I am dying; the sense of imminent death. The childhood memory is of dying, but I now understand that I may have passed out. This hasn't stopped the memory, the feeling of death that sometimes fills my senses.

Pilate, the figure of power in the region, knew that Jesus was innocent, that he was a good man, who told the truth. Despite knowing that those who called for his crucifixion were wrong, when placed under pressure by the crowds he chose not to intervene, not to save Jesus, not to use his power to put a stop to this terrible injustice. Instead he handed Jesus over to those who would kill him.

After the abuse my injury was tended in hushed tones and anxiety I remember that; the kitchen table, the blue walls, the tension and the pain; but my distress was uncontainable. My grandmother told my father that I cried too much and that he had to take me away as she could not cope with me anymore. Fragmentation and disintegration followed. My distress became disconnected from the abuse and no one was there to hold me or put me back together. The truth of what had happened was lost in the chaos and disintegration of my fragmented self.

In time my mother returned home with my younger brother but she was unwell. She was unpredictable, volatile, and uncontrollable. Her temper would flare up at the slightest trigger and my older brother and I became the target of verbal and physical abuse and emotional neglect.

At the age of six I began to stay with my grandparents for weekends; me one week and my brother the next. It gave us all a break from my mother. My grandfather told me that he loved me and that my mother was mad and did not love me. As he slowly groomed me, recognising my vulnerability and isolation from my mother, he began to abuse me again: when bathing me, putting me to bed, dressing and undressing me, when sitting on his lap.

Then at about the age of nine, in my memory it is as if I suddenly became aware that what my grandfather was doing was wrong.

It is dark and I have woken up and can see what he is doing to me. I feel anxious and confused, like I have let this happen and that I have to stop it, but I am scared. After what seems like forever I tell him that what he is doing is wrong; the heavens and the earth crash about me, an explosion of anger, nausea, my legs go weak. I am silenced by his anger, by the shouting, by the threats and fear, by the knowledge that this is so very, very bad, that I am bad. The abuse stops but the truth has been locked away in fear.

What does betrayal feel like? It feels like this: the loss of the ground beneath your feet, the loss of relationship and trust, the shattering of love: nausea, fear, sadness; a descent into darkness and isolation; the carrying of blame, guilt and shame; a never ending despair and confusion, an unending nightmare.

Judas could not accept his betrayal of Jesus, the confusion, guilt and shame of what he had done caused him to take his own life.

Very soon after these events I collapsed physically and emotionally, I spent weeks in bed, unable to get up, doctors came and went but we all just had to wait for a time when I could stand up again. In the long term I became isolated from my family, cut off from the outside world, unable to communicate or form relationships. I began to self harm and became bulimic, all in secret, and at the age of 21 made an attempt to take my life.

When eventually some twenty one years after I had first confronted my grandfather, I told my family about the abuse, it was only then that an uncle could tell me about my grandfather, about the fact that he had physically and emotionally abused his sons, that he had beaten my grandmother for years,

that one day in the middle of the high street he had hit her so hard that he had burst her eardrum. He also was able to tell me about the police coming to my grandfather one day before I was born, and cautioning him for sexually assaulting a school girl near where he worked.

My family had kept silent for so many years yet before I was born they knew that my grandfather was abusive and dangerous yet they were too scared to challenge him, too afraid of what it would mean to them if the truth was acknowledged. In that silence they colluded with my grandfather, his betrayal, his abuse of me was made possible by their silence; by my grandmother washing her hands of me when I was hurt, by her handing me over to him every weekend I stayed at their house.

### **Questions**

1. Has anyone in the group experienced betrayal by a loved one or betrayed a loved one? Discuss how this makes you feel, the impact it had on you.
2. Silence and fear perpetuate violence and abuse. If you know what is going on would you tell, would you try to stop the abuse?
3. Often people feel that those they turn to for help wash their hands of them, refusing to help because it may all be too difficult. How can your community ensure there is a place for people to listen and be heard and maybe helped?

## **Reflection**

### **Where was God?**

And you will ask “where was God when these things happened?”

God was in the knowing that it was wrong.

In the wrongness of what happened,

in the pain, distress and suffering.

God was in the shame, the guilt,

the loss and despair.

And God’s presence is timeless.

Through reflecting, sharing what happened now

God is made present then,

and the wrongness of what happened then,

through being known now, is known then.

## Silence, Truth and Denial

### **Matthew 26: 57 – end**

This is a painful and complex passage where we are brought face to face with humanity in all its weakness and fear. People too scared to face the truth, confused, fearful, angry and hurt. Peter denies that he even knows Jesus, scared that if he acknowledges him he too will be arrested, confused that the man he thought he knew is something else, not understanding what is happening. As if suddenly in the trauma of Jesus' arrest, he no longer knows what the past three years have been about, what Jesus stood for, what and who he is. Yet Peter finally understands, in a moment of realisation, as the cock crows, he understands that Jesus knew him, and he wept bitterly for his denial, his fear, his human frailty.

Then there are the Jewish leaders and elders desperately trying to hold on to their power, keep alive their faith and culture under oppressive occupation. Angry that Jesus has challenged them, has forced them to confront their lack of faith, scared of what it will mean if he is right, if the kingdom of God is now, if it is not about power and control, but rather about empowering and listening. Danger and uncertainty lies where Jesus has asked them to follow. Vested interest and the greater good of the community struggles with facing the challenges of the truth that Jesus presented them with.

They decide that Jesus must be destroyed, discredited. People try to bare false witness but it doesn't work. Jesus hadn't lied or blasphemed against God. But he did say that if the temple was torn down he would rebuild it in three days, he did say that this day they would see the son of man seated at the right hand of the father. It was the truth that sealed his fate. The elders could not tolerate what Jesus said. To them it was blasphemy, an intolerable truth, their world turned upside down. The ferocity of their anger and hatred is all consuming.

Reflecting on the complexity of the responses of those around Jesus, I am struck by Peter's response, his process of coming from fear and confusion to understanding, and I compare that to the response from the elders and leaders, who could not bring themselves to understand, could not tolerate the truth Jesus forced them to face and so set about to destroy him. And also there is Jesus' response to the reactions of those around him. Having said his truth he said no more, accepting the consequences of that truth telling.

It is so hard to tell the truth when you cannot know what the consequences will be, what the reactions will be of those around you. At the same time it is so very difficult to hear and understand the truth, to be challenged, to have your knowing, your world turned upside down.

Coming from a history of childhood sexual abuse I spent years unable to process what had happened to me, unable to understand the truth. The truth was that I had been raped and sexually abused by my grandfather from my earliest memory until about the age of 9. It was then that I told him that what he was doing was wrong. My grandfather got angry and agitated, shouting, denied he had done anything wrong, he threatened and ultimately silenced me through fear and confusion.

That silencing was as powerful, formative and damaging as the abuse had been. I put these things away, deep inside, in that fearful and confused place. Shortly afterwards my life broke down; I could no longer go out, could no longer engage with others. All relationships were severed, all communication. I did not know who I was, could not understand my feelings, my fears. I had no sense of self. Years of self harm, bulimia and chaos followed.

The truth of what had happened to me waited for me to turn towards it again which I only began to do in my twenties. My first reaction was again to deny it, to try to block it out, then to minimise and dismiss it, to say it did not matter any more, it was over. What would it mean if it were true, if I accepted what had happened? My life would never be the same again, my family would hate me, I would lose everything. Above all the truth was intolerable to me.

But with help, with therapy and support, I began to hold what had happened to me, to understand, and began to say my truth. I understood that my grandfather betrayed my trust, violated my integrity and undermined my sense of self. I understood the harm that had been caused not only by the abuse but also by the years of silence, of denial and fear. I have had to return to what happened time and again in my life as each time integrating more, understanding more. It is a life-long process.

The common message to survivors who try to deal with these issues within church communities has been to urge them to forgive and forget, get over it, move on. I am sure that this is well meaning, as if a better thing to do, not to trouble oneself with these things. Yet it is also an attempt to silence, push away intolerable truths, protect the community from unspeakable abuse, not wanting to disturb and disrupt the peace of the community. But this does not help those trying to come to an understanding of their experiences.

## **Questions**

1. Think about a time when you have found it difficult to hear what someone is telling you. How did it make you feel?
2. What can your church community do to make it possible for people to bring their pain and suffering and find support? Maybe you already have bereavement groups or other support groups in your church.
3. How can you let people know that your church is a safe place to come to, where people can feel supported and heard, rather than silenced and their truth denied?

## **Reflection**

It is important to remember  
the outspoken critic, the prophet,  
the voice that spoke out during  
the times of terror, of darkness.

It is important to remember the self  
that remained knowing,  
who knew that what was happening was wrong.

Remember the small defiances,  
the silent protests,  
the unyielding courage in the face of terror.

It is important to remember the self  
that took deliberate steps,  
made the best choices she could  
and was purposive in her decisions.

In that remembering there is dignity,  
truth and understanding of myself.  
And when decisions have been celebrated,  
and strategies for survival acknowledged  
I can let go of them,  
their purpose fulfilled.

I survived.



## Suffering and Raw Pain

### **Mark 15: 25-26, 33-39**

*When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land... 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*

Human beings have been creating stories since ancient times, whether by images on cave walls or shaped in wood or through the oral tradition – stories have always been around. They are part of who we are and where we come from. They have been passed on from one generation to the next by rhythm and drums and through the written word. They connect us to one another. We live from within our own stories and people read us by the things we do, the words we utter and the legacies we leave behind. To exist at the surface of them is to be out of touch with others, and ourselves. It is to be unreal. Jesus lived a good story, one of justice and compassion. He reached out to those on the edge of society, the lost and rejected, he stood at the threshold of their lives, welcomed them into his freedom – and they were healed. His story left something real and permanent behind and his truth took him to the darkness of the cross – shame, abandonment and raw pain... *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*

As I was drawing to the end of my training as a counsellor, I listened to the case study of a woman who had been brought up in a family with an inverted belief system and where Christianity was turned upside down. Night-time ceremonies of evil intent and the misuse of power involving the sacrifice of animals and hideous cruelty to herself and other young children, were a regular occurrence. The perpetrators came from all walks of life, including the priesthood. I was shocked. My first reaction was one of disbelief and denial. Such atrocities might go on in other countries, but this is England, I thought, a safe land of gentle rain and birdsong and peeling church bells – that sort of thing just doesn't happen. Everything within me wanted to dismiss it, to forget all about it and turn to other things, but her story had dropped into my head like a lead balloon, demanding to be heard. The secret underworld of organised ritual abuse had opened up before me and my understanding of humanity was suddenly jolted out of all recognition. *Hers* was a horror story, but it was also one of creative survival and as I reflected on its meaning I knew that *mine* would draw me into working therapeutically with such people.

Emotional neglect and sexual violation are threaded through the lives of many children in our society and they are powerless to do anything about it. Sometimes the trauma goes on for years and is so chronic that the only escape is to take flight inwardly, to observe from afar as though it's happening to

someone else. The memories are dissociated, locked away in the mind and the abuse seemingly forgotten. This self-protective defence allows the child to get on with the familiar activities of going to school and church and mixing with others – the ordinary things of growing up. Innocence has been plundered, however, and such wounds leave their mark. As they grow to adulthood, divisions are brought about within the personality. While all seems well on the outside, their inner world is fragmented, haunted by intrusions from the past. They are incoherent with fear and everyday existence is turned into chaos by bouts of memory loss, body pains and addictions. Partnerships are torn apart and there are the scars of self-destruction. They have become continually wary and rigid, either simmering in rage or hating themselves into blank despair. Their lives have been twisted and broken and turned into lies. Their stories are in tatters.

Meaning comes when a story is told by one and received with quiet attention by another, yet for someone who has been devastated in such a way it is a huge risk to be placed at the mercy of a therapist, to let go of hard-won control and disclose the secrets of a lifetime. For such a person, the path to healing calls for profound courage and it requires me, the counsellor, to treat that individual with high regard, to stay calm and non-judgemental, to remain rooted in my own integrity. Unconditional acceptance within a safe alliance opens the way for trust to grow and it begins with deep listening – the kind that can bear witness to the bad things never before spoken of. As our work progresses, the truth begins to reveal itself and separate, traumatised identities make themselves known. A grown woman might switch to a part of herself that is like a child and using a doll to illustrate her sadistic torture, she tells of the rejections, the betrayals and deceptions, the isolation of being unloved. At other times she can find no narrative, but I read her story in the wide desperate eyes, the gaunt face, grey and etched with suffering as faith dies amongst dark thoughts of ever surviving this journey – this place of shame, abandonment and raw pain... ‘My God, my God, where are you in all of this?’

It is at such times amidst the struggles at the boundaries of life, that Wisdom can be found *beside the way, at the crossroads...*,<sup>1</sup> gathering the tormented dreams and lost memories, the fragile strands of shattered stories and weaving them into a parable of hope. There come moments of relief, an insight, a change, a flash of humour and we grow strangely vulnerable to one another. We discover a loving purpose invisibly at work within the silent spaces of the counselling relationship ... *more than we know is going on in what is going on...what is really going on is beyond us...is bigger than all of us...*<sup>2</sup> and something unexpectedly new emerges.

## Questions

1. When you hear media reports of childhood abuse, what is your response?
2. What opportunities are there in your faith community for people to tell their stories – to listen and attend to one another?
3. How are you living *your* story?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Proverbs 8 vs.2

<sup>2</sup>Cotter, J. (1997) Brainsquall (p.127). Sheffield: Cairns Publications.

## **Reflection**

My God my God, why have you forsaken me?

You are far from my plea and the cry of my distress.

O my God, I call by day and you give no reply;

I call by night and I find no peace.

Do not leave me alone in my distress;

Come close, there is no-one else to help.

Oh lord. Do not leave me alone,

My strength, make haste to help me!

(from The Grail Psalms – An Inclusive Language Version)

## **This is Faith**

*The following inscription was found in a cave in Cologne where Jews had hidden during the holocaust:*

“I believe in the Sun, though it is raining heavy

I believe in God, though he is silent

I believe in love, though it is absent.”

## Death, Silence, New Life

### **John 20: 1-18**

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark.....*

When dusk begins to fall in the Middle East the sky is streaked with fiery shades of red and orange and the land glows gold in the setting sun. It's stunningly beautiful – awesome even and we can only gaze at the wonder of it all. At the beginning of the day it's not quite so dramatic but nevertheless, there is something special about keeping watch at the threshold, as the first glimmers of dawn bring waking sounds into the landscape. Mary Magdalene wouldn't have been thinking of such things I'm sure, because she had come to the tomb *while it was still dark* – very dark! She had witnessed the brutal execution of someone she loved and must have felt utterly shaken to the core. No doubt her sleep had been disturbed with the tortured images of Jesus on the cross flashing through her dreams and causing her to re-live the trauma over and over again. Her life was in pieces, her emotions shattered. All expectations for the future had disappeared. She could only go to the garden and listen to the silence of the dead.

There is something special about silence too, but I'm speaking of another kind. For many years I had the good fortune to live in the Sultanate of Oman, a country that lies at the southernmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula. A remote land dominated by mountains with vast and arid regions that stretch throughout its interior. Like many others, I was fascinated by this primeval wasteland. I found the silence inviting me closer, compelling me to enter. It seeped into me, gripped me and drew me deeper into myself. I began to 'let go' and discovered that what was 'out there' in the shifting sands, the jagged rocks, the crumbling blistering desert – in the emptiness; was also the same as the wild wilderness of my own internal world.

Back in the UK, I was oddly reminded of this 'letting go' experience quite recently when I took part in a tandem parachute jump, diving headfirst out of an aircraft at 12,000ft. Nothing could have prepared me for the initial shock. I gasped as the wind rushed into my face with such alarming force that I could barely breathe. In a panic I wanted desperately to reach out for something to grasp, but there was only wide-open space and thick cloud far below. The earth was nowhere to be seen. It was too late to turn back – I had totally abandoned myself to the sky and was falling...falling into nothingness. I could only trust the process and cling to the hope that it would be all right. It was of course and I landed – not in the most dignified manner, but safely! In a similar way, 'letting go' and 'trust' became significant as I

continued to listen in the isolated areas of Oman. The silence had an influence that was at times obvious, at times imperceptible, but it soon became clear that I was passing into my own symbolic desert. Fixed boundaries began to unfreeze and existing beliefs were challenged. Everything I had previously thought important wasn't important and all the things I had considered unimportant were vital. I had said 'yes' to a love that would take me into the very depths of my being – there to encounter my childhood. It was only a glimpse, I could have pushed it away, buried it deep and forever, but I chose not to. I heard its silent scream and it became my awakening. As bad memories came tumbling forth and hidden pain rose to the surface, there were the tears I couldn't shed as a child, the anger I wasn't allowed to release, the crippling shame and fears not expressed. My early years, I realised, had been plucked away like pulling apart the wings of a butterfly, piece by piece, so it could no longer fly in the sunshine or feel the breeze on its face. I was floundering and lost in a psychic storm where everything had been reduced to chaos. It felt like a kind of death, but this is a journey where the Spirit hovers, where inner stillness meets outer silence – *deep calls to deep*<sup>1</sup> and in time, I found myself moving to another drumbeat. Life became strangely different.

Mary Magdalene had travelled with Jesus, lived in his presence and absorbed his teachings. She had listened to the language of the desert and visited its waste places. *She had let go into a new deep end...stripped of what she once held dear and entered into a trackless waste, a formless mess, such as is always 'in the beginning'...*<sup>2</sup> and out of her darkness came a Light. When daybreak arrived on that Sunday morning, she was the first to witness the risen Christ.

## **Questions**

1. How is it possible to find time for quiet, listening prayer in your life and in your faith community
2. What is your understanding of a 'wilderness experience'?
3. Where has your journey of faith taken you?

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Psalm 42 vs.7

<sup>2</sup>Cotter, J. (2001) Waymarks. Cairns for a journey. (p.149) Sheffield: Cairns Publications.

## **Reflection**

Imagine

In a dark room

There is a small cradle of forgiveness

Under the covers

Peace lies, person shaped

Ready to be held

She has already been delivered into your arms

Red and crumpled

You have just laid her down for now

She will need to grow into her skin

You will need to be gentle with her

And tough

She fascinates you

When she wakes

You will hold her again

She is your relation

## Wounds & Scars

### **John: 20: 19 - 29**

*Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you!" After this, he showed them his hands and side.*

Why did the wounds remain in Jesus' hands, feet and side when he rose from the dead? These wounds did not seem to cause him pain anymore, nor were they infected, but they remained. This has profound implications for those who have suffered abuse and trauma.

The story of the resurrection I had been told of was of a man who died for our sins, went down to hell, defeated darkness and death, and rose again to ascend to his father in heaven, thus bringing everlasting life to all those who follow him. But those wounds remained. Why? They were obviously important as the disciples did not recognise him without seeing the wounds, as though the wounds were a sign of authenticity, but maybe they are also a message of the true nature of life.

How do I begin to understand this man, Jesus, who still had wounds that were open when he appeared to the disciples? To me this is a man who was not ashamed of his suffering. Jesus showed his disciples the holes in his hands and side without hesitation. He took Thomas' hand and placed it in the wound in his side. So intimate, so utterly open, so shocking! The crucifixion was the most shaming of deaths that a person could endure in that place at that time and yet he kept within his body the memory of his suffering forever, as if these wounds and scars are part of what has made him whole, complete.

I have wounds, deep and often painful; wounds from rape, sexual abuse, physical and emotional abuse and I have hidden my wounds for years. My repeated crucifixions happened in dark, secret places, away from witnesses. The things done to me were shaming, degrading and utterly violating, tearing my body open. The taboo of incest and rape remains in the shadows. No one would want this to happen to them, or to let another know what their family was like, what they must therefore be like.

Who would want to see or hear what has happened to me, the scars on my body, in my mind, the cut wrists from a time when the pain was too much to hold? Yet this is part of who I am, these experiences made me the person I am today.



*“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven”*

Time and again I have been told to not bring these things to mind, to let go, to get on with my life, to forgive and forget. I am told that this would show that I have faith, that I am healed. All I need to do is forgive and believe in the Gospel. I have tried with every sinew in my being to not bring to mind the suffering in my past, the mind numbing, terrifying despair of my childhood and early adulthood, but the wounds remain, and the memories.

I think the reason these memories refuse to go away is because I need to integrate them into my being, make my experiences, feelings, emotions part of me. I want to bring to life all those parts of me that were made dead by my abusers, to become fully alive. I am tired of being ashamed of what happened, of pretending that nothing happened, tired of having to hide the consequences, pretending that I am over it. I want to be known, I want to transform my experiences, the pain, confusion, chaos and suffering into life. I want to live with integrity but I cannot do this by forgetting, by pretending, by praying that it will all go away.

The resurrection is not about forgetting that the crucifixion happened: the suffering of Jesus is remembered every year in every detail, and he wore the wounds on his body as sign of his true nature, of our natures. I want to remember my suffering, be able to carry my scars in my body with dignity and integrity and I want my suffering to be transformative.

Through accepting what happened to me, through the integration of my experiences into my life, through embracing the pain and suffering I endured healing becomes possible and I begin to live with integrity, to live fully and love deeply. This is what forgiveness is then: it's the courage, love and integrity to hold all that has happened to you in such a way as to transform your life into fullness and wholeness.

### **Questions**

1. We all have wounds and scars from our life experiences. How often do we seek to hide these in shame, in fear that we might not be normal, acceptable?
2. Is there a space where someone can come into your church community and tell you their story of suffering, show you their wounds and be accepted?
3. What can your church community do to provide a safe enough place for people who have endured trauma and abuse in their lives, so that they may transform their suffering into life?

## **Reflection**

I cannot yet give thanks my life has been restored  
That pain has been banished or I have learned to dance  
But I can give thanks for this  
For the light that cracked the curtains  
And called me to open up my eyes  
And helped me put my bare feet on the floor  
I cannot yet give thanks that I have beaten being depressed  
That I'm not furious at my brittle sense of shame  
But I can give thanks for this  
For the water in the sink that splashed my face  
And washed away the sleep  
And helped me face the day ahead refreshed  
I cannot yet give thanks I have forgiven the painful cost  
That I can speak unbound or name it how it is  
But I can give thanks for this  
That I am wearing bright clothes, not veiled in shame  
And some buttons will remain undone  
And my body has a hope all is not lost  
I cannot yet give thanks that I'm healed and free  
That I have broken all the powers that tie my tongue  
But I can give thanks for this  
That I have opened the door on another day  
And stepped out on the street and raised my head  
And looked up at the sky and remembered I am me

## **The Journey of Forgiveness – a piece for further reflection**

The concept of forgiveness is simple isn't it?

- i. If a person does wrong to you, causes harm to you, if he repents and asks your forgiveness you must forgive him.
- ii. Or is it, if a person does wrong to you, causes you harm, you must forgive him even if he does not ask for it.
- iii. Or is it, if a person does wrong to you, causes you harm, you must change you life completely, undo the harm caused to you, allow yourself to be healed, forgive yourself for being affected by the harm caused, understand the offender and forgive him.
- iv. Or is it, if a person does wrong to you, causes you harm, and he realises he has done wrong, repents and changes his ways, and then makes reparation to you and helps you to recover from the wrong caused, then you must forgive him if he asks.

Maybe then the concept is not so simple!

- The first does not require much beyond a superficial repentance and a superficial forgiveness. No one has to do much except repeat the mantra "I am sorry" and "I forgive you". What does he repents mean? Is he then able to carry on doing wrong, does he understand at all the harm caused? This is unsatisfactory.
- The second requires nothing from the offender at all, so that he is free to continue doing wrong to others, causing harm. The one wronged off loads the hurt and harm by immediately forgiving the offender. What happens to the hurt, to the harm caused, what happens to the future victims of the offender. This is also unsatisfactory.
- The third is about conversion. It is about the conversion of the one harmed. It is about Metanoia and healing, and requires faith from the one who has been hurt. It is about saying that I will not hold onto the hurt caused to me, I will not let it define or destroy my life. I will become whole, more whole than I was before. I will understand me, I will understand the offender, and when that is done, through the grace of God, I will have forgiven myself for the times I did not do anything and allowed my life to be so limited by the hurt caused to me, and I will forgive the offender because I have understood his humanity, his frailty and I have understood the hurt he has carried which caused him to do wrong. If the offender does not accept that he is forgiven, is

not able to respond then he remains in need of healing, grace and repentance.

- The last is also about conversion. It is about the offender being truly repentant (like Paul), The offender undoes the wrong cause as far as he is able, makes restitution, changes his ways and sincerely seeks never to do these wrongs again. It is a story of conversion and of grace.

This is not an easy thing to speak of to people who have suffered grievous hurt in childhood. They have a long journey to make towards recovery. Often their coping mechanisms will mean that they are unable to develop relationships, unable to be safe, are left open to further abuse. Even when they begin to see the cause of their chaos, the strength and courage required to face it all and deal with it can be overwhelming. Many choose to lie down on the mat and never get up. Others repeat the abuse they experienced in childhood, and cause harm to those they come into contact with. Others still continue in the chaos of their lives, never becoming the person they are meant to be, never trusting, never loving, never giving fully of themselves.

How to say to a person who has been sexually, physically, emotionally and psychologically abused throughout her childhood that she must make the journey to recovery and wholeness, that she must forgive herself, must change her ways, must understand what happened, face the shame and pain and torment of her childhood. Only this way is life and only she can do it. And you won't always be supported, you may be shunned and hurt in the process, you may be misunderstood and rejected as you seek understanding, you may never hear the word "sorry" from your abusers, the cost will be huge, the journey may be very long, you will be torn to pieces again and again as you face what happened to you.

And one can never say that she must forgive her abusers, because it is not hers to offer until she has been given the grace to do it. It is a gift if you will, a gift that comes unexpectedly, in the midst of this struggle to survive, to live. At some point in the process she finds that she has forgiven herself for the chaos in her life, for the coping strategies, for the times when she could not live with integrity. And then one day she looks around at the offender and in her understanding of his humanity, his weakness, and his own hurt, she knows that he is forgiven and she can let go of him.

Forgiveness is an integral part of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. It is an integral part of becoming fully alive yet it is something that cannot be grasped at, cannot be given to order, it is grace, it is a gift of the resurrection.

## Remembering & Making Sense – Emmaus

**Luke 24:13-35**

*When he was at table with them he took bread,  
blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.  
Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him*

**1**

Remembering brings understanding

This Emmaus story

It's the story of the people - the ones who usually didn't get heard

- not the leaders, but those who live with the consequences

of the leaders' decisions

- not the crowds

- but the friends.

Remembering brings understanding

So they talk and argue as they walk along,

struggling with their experience,

separated from one another by shared grief.

Until Jesus asks:

“What are you debating?”

and they tell him a shared story.

the story of their community,

of their hope.

And it is clear that,  
whatever it was they were arguing about between them,  
when someone from outside asks  
they find they have a united story.

Remembering brings understanding

Jesus helps them see how their part of the story  
fits with the whole  
then they seek out others:  
having scattered, they find each other again,  
meet together  
hear others' experiences  
and tell their own.  
They listen,  
and they are listened to.

Remembering brings understanding.

But how do we remember  
the difficult stories  
honestly –  
in a way that brings  
understanding, even healing?

It is easy to get stuck telling the same story  
in the same way  
in a way that is 're-living', not re-membering,  
and keeps us stuck.

The disciples on the Emmaus road were stuck  
and separated.

It is the presence of another, of Jesus,  
a 'stranger-friend' that helps them to remember differently  
and together.

Bringing out their sadness  
their anger ("this is not how things were meant to be!")  
they are listened to and their story held as important.

They get creative  
see their story as part of the whole  
and suddenly need to find others  
who shared it – seeking understanding as they  
hear themselves tell their story

It often happens that it is when we hear ourselves  
telling our difficult stories  
that the healing begins -  
begins with a listening to ourselves  
and with the precious experience of  
knowing ourselves listened to by others.

The two on the Emmaus road  
had all the wisdom to understand rightly  
through their remembering.  
They just needed someone to ask  
and to listen—drawing out their experience  
by asking the questions  
and leaving space for the answer.

Jesus having heard their story,  
having got them to hear it themselves  
is able to place it in the wider context -  
they are not alone with this.  
His presence lends their experience meaning  
as he reflects back their story  
and their eyes are opened.

It's in the breaking of the bread  
as we return to the same act over and again  
that we can recognise change in us  
and in others;  
coming back to the same place, and finding it different  
we are helped to remember and to re-member  
who we are  
in relation to God  
to ourselves  
and to one another.

Jesus' action turns them around  
and they go immediately to seek out others:  
where before they were scattered,  
they now seek each other out.

Remembering brings understanding.



## 2

We are the body of Christ  
together  
not individually  
and we all have a piece of the story.

Each time we come together,  
particularly when we share bread and wine,  
we remember  
we re-member:  
we put the story together again –  
just as the disciples did -  
- when they shared their experiences -  
it led to a fullness of understanding, of life,  
with Jesus in the midst of them.

How do we know Christ today?  
through the breaking of bread,  
and the sharing of wine,  
through our lives shared with one another.

When we hear others  
we gain more understanding of them  
and also of ourselves:  
when someone speaks of a pain or a joy  
and it resonates with us –  
Jesus is here.

We are a community of witnesses –  
to our own stories  
to each other's  
to the bigger stories that encompass us all.

And this particularly in the breaking of bread together.

Just as for these disciples who found their own story  
bound up with the larger one  
encompassed by God's story.

It was when Jesus broke bread  
that their eyes were opened,  
so for us we return again  
and again to that act of breaking:  
we share in the breaking when we share in the bread.  
the one broken and shared becomes more than one  
and the many become one when they share the pieces.

we share in the re-membering  
when the many souls and bodies  
become one living sacrifice through the sharing of the bread.

### 3

I am in church on an ordinary Sunday  
I receive communion and return to my place  
it feels more appropriate to kneel there, more reverent.  
reverence not so much for God  
but for the body of Christ  
here in this place.

I am struck again, as I often am at communion,  
by the act of this body, in this place  
broken  
And re-remembering  
- a resurrection moment.

And I am there as witness  
as each alone and together  
remembers.

People file past me and I know them -  
them and the stories that they bring with them  
some I know well others not so much.  
but we are here, sharing this act of remembering –  
the cycle of broken/restored.

More people file past me and I bring to mind some present stories.  
recent bereavement  
a new birth  
a couple newly in love  
a man whose past stays painfully present

Others I know less well  
but I can imagine that in this room, at this moment,  
exists the breadth of human experience  
- in all it's fullness -  
It is the breadth of our stories  
brought here, once again to this place  
- broken open and re-membered -  
that make us the body of Christ  
Because life in all its fullness  
exists in this place.

After communion in our final prayer we say  
we offer "our souls and bodies,  
to be a living sacrifice"

Many souls, many bodies  
together one living sacrifice  
one body  
'Sacrifice' not in terms of life given up  
or demanded for restitution  
but sacrifice as something made sacred  
becoming holy,  
becoming whole.

As the body of Christ together  
we are life in all it's fullness –  
joy and sorrow  
darkness and dancing  
together we hold it all.

And as I kneel, I am witness to that life, to this body:  
sensing, almost imperceptibly,  
as we continue this unspectacular ritual,  
wholeness is becoming.  
We share in, and witness, an act at once both personally intimate  
and fully shared,  
we bring ourselves and our stories  
to this moment, here  
to the breaking open and the re-membering  
and perhaps our eyes are opened,  
and we recognise

We are the Body of Christ.

### **Questions**

1. What experience have you had of hearing your own stories and those of others? Are there stories that you need to hear, or that you need to be heard?
2. Where do you most sense you are part of the body of Christ? What does that mean to you?
3. What do you think of the notion of sacrifice as a process of 'becoming holy, becoming whole'?

## **Reflection**

In the end...  
when my eyes have dimmed and  
this journey's through,  
can I say that  
I've lived my life  
in truth?  
Can I say that  
I've entered a gate  
to the sacred, engaged  
with the divine,  
explored my own darkness and  
reclaimed the shadows –  
those feared and rejected parts?

In the end...  
when I'm bent with age and  
this journey's through,  
can I say that  
I've opened my heart to  
the silenced, the betrayed,  
the frightened and lost?  
And will I have listened  
and heard  
and known  
and lived into  
God's loving response...  
In the end?

## **Resources**

For information on resources, local and national organisations, and books;

**DABS** – Directory and Book Services [www.dabsbooks.co.uk](http://www.dabsbooks.co.uk) Phone: 01709 860023

## **Organisations**

**Breaking Free** – for women who were sexually abused as children [www.breakingfreecharity.org.uk](http://www.breakingfreecharity.org.uk)

Helpline: 0845 108 0055

Minicom: 0208 648 3500

**Christian Survivors of Sexual Abuse National (CSSA)** – offers self help support, runs retreats and produces a newsletter

Contact: 38 Sydenham Villas Road, Cheltenham GL52 6DZ

**First Person Plural** – newsletter for survivors of trauma and abuse who experience dissociative distress,

Contact: PO Box 2537, Wolverhampton, WV4 4ZL

**MACSAS (Minster and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors)** – a self help organisation for those who have been sexually abused by ministers and clergy as children and/or as adults

Helpline: 08088 01 03 40      website: [www.macsas.com](http://www.macsas.com)

**NAPAC** – National Association for People Abused in Childhood. A national referral line for adult survivors of childhood physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse.

Open: Mon – Fri 10.30am – 3pm

Helpline: 0800 085 3330      website: [www.napac.org.uk](http://www.napac.org.uk)

**NSPCC Child protection Helpline** – 24 hr helpline for anyone concerned about a child at risk of abuse.

Helpline: 0808 800 5000      website: [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

**Poppy Project** - provides support and accommodation for women who have been trafficked into the UK for purposes of prostitution

Helpline: 0207 840 7129

Phone: 0207 735 2062

[www.eaves4women.co.uk](http://www.eaves4women.co.uk)

email: [post@eaveshousing.co.uk](mailto:post@eaveshousing.co.uk)

Eaves, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Lincoln House, 1-3 Brixton Road, London SW9 6DE

**Rape Crisis England and Wales** – website providing basic information that survivors of sexual violence, friends and family need to access the services they need.

[www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk)

email: [info@rapecrisis.org.uk](mailto:info@rapecrisis.org.uk)

**The Samaritans** – 24 hr confidential emotional support

Phone: 08457 909090

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**The Survivor's Trust** – National network of specialist agencies/groups that provide support to survivors of rape, sexual violence and sexual abuse

Phone: 01788 944 4411

Contact: 27b William Street, Rugby, CV21 3HA

Email: [survivorstrust@btconnect.com](mailto:survivorstrust@btconnect.com)

**Survivors UK** – Helpline for men and their supporters. Information, support and counselling about sexual assault

Helpline: 0845 122 1201

Open Mon, Tues and Thurs 7-10pm

[www.survivorsuk.org.uk](http://www.survivorsuk.org.uk)



## Therapy, Counselling and Support

### **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)**

[www.counselling.co.uk](http://www.counselling.co.uk)

Offers an information service providing contacts for counselling in England and Wales.

### **TAG**

[www.tag-uk.net](http://www.tag-uk.net)

A group studying and supporting work concerning trauma, abuse & dissociation.

### **RAINS** (Ritual Abuse Information and Network Support) - Tel: 01483 898600

For professionals and carers who support survivors.

## Books

### **The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**

Ellen Bass and Laura Davis. A Handbook for survivors and those working with survivors

### **Victims No Longer: A Guide for Men Recovering from Child Sexual Abuse**

Mike Lew

### **Breaking Free: Help for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse**

Carolyn Ainsworth and Kay Toon

### **Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror**

Judith Lewis Herman (Reprinted 2001, Pandora).

### **DABS Survivors Resource Pack** for adult survivors of childhood sexual, physical & emotional abuse

### **A Spirituality of Survival: enabling a response to trauma and abuse**

Barbara Glasson (Continuum 2009)

### **Time for Action** – Churches Together in Britain & Ireland (MPH 2002)

### **Courage to Tell** : Survivors Stories

Margaret Kennedy (CTBI 1999)

### **Attachment, Trauma and Multiplicity**

Valerie Sinason, ed (Routledge, London, 2002)

### **Proverbs of Ashes** (Violence, redemptive suffering and the search for what saves us)

Rita Brock & Rebecca Parker (Beacon Press 2001)

### **Why Love Matters**

Sue Gerhardt (Brunner-Routledge 2004)

### **The Politics and Experience of Ritual Abuse**

Sara Scott (Open University Press 2001)

### **Breaking the Chains of Abuse**

Sue Atkinson (Lion Hudson 2006)

### **Home Truths About Child Sexual Abuse**

Catherine Itzin, ed (Routledge 2000)



## **A Creed**

I believe some things that have happened to me

Resulted from other people's deliberate choices to harm me

Or a corruption of their love for me

And I am not responsible for these things

I believe that during my life

Some good people have acted in my best interest

And others out of wickedness, malice, self gratification or weakness

And some people have confused the two.

I believe that just as I can be truly grateful for the things that come as welcome gifts

I can be truly angry for the things that have abused me and robbed me of so much

I am coming to believe that I am allowed to shout about the things that have silenced me

I can rage out loud about the boundaries that have been violated

I can take time to lament the many lost things of the past that have reduced my life.

I believe that I am not defined by abuse and that

I am not beholden to my abusers

I am not responsible for making things right between us

I can be free to break the bonds of power that have held us together in the past.

I believe that God does not require me to be a victim

Or to make anyone else a victim

I am divinely encouraged to claim the real potential of my life

And in this I am not alone

I believe that the world is not defined by evil, or by its memory or effects

But by amazing and eternal possibility and I believe that

Corruption and abuse can ultimately be defeated

Giving space, freedom, joy, hope and life.