

The Disproportionate Cross



Opening Prayer – Leunig. In Order to be Truthful.

In order to be truthful

We must do more than speak the truth.

We must also hear truth.

We must also receive truth.

We must also act upon truth.

We must also search for truth.

The difficult truth,
within us and around us.

We must devote ourselves to truth.

Otherwise we are dishonest
and our lives are mistaken.

God grant us the strength and the courage

To be truthful.

Amen.

Sermon. St Johns Nelson. 8/10/06.

In my office at Trinity/St Johns College in Auckland, sitting within a particular alcove on one of the bookshelves I keep a number of significant symbols and items. Items which speak to me of people, events, that have marked a

pivotal stage on my ongoing process of coming to and keeping the faith, at the centre of which for me is a God in process.

In the centre stands this cross, made for me by a friend, Wellington artist and poet, Rhonda Svenson, who lives daily with the effects of varying disabilities.

Let me tell you something of the story and symbolism behind this significant piece of artwork, entitled, "The Disproportionate Cross."

The story is as told to me by Rhonda who has given me permission to use her story and her artwork.

The cross was made after a deep spiritual reaction at the first New Zealand Spirituality and Disability Conference, "Through the Whirlwind" – held in Wellington, May 2003. A hugely significant gathering of people from Australia and New Zealand many of whom live with effects of varying physical and mental impairments who gathered together in order to express for themselves their own theological and spiritual expressions of faith in community.

The two different sized pieces of wood and the deliberate crooked angle, reflect and encompass the body of difference within the whole body of Christ. It is deliberately disproportionate. Not a straight up and down cross with perfect dimensions – it represent difference, represent the power imbalances – represents the varying disjunctions Rhonda feels are part of her living.

The power differentials – most people assume when looking at a cross that the pieces of wood are of equal proportion. Most disabled people don't have power – but they are whole – there is beauty in who they are - they don't have to be anything other than they are. When people look at the cross – it makes them think – makes them ask – it was a very therapeutic exercise, like a living journey to speak out who and what my Christ is.

Due to the drying process – 9 layers – each layer takes 24 hours to dry. The small glass tiles are grouted with black paint running on to the cross. The glass tiles around the side, some are deliberately missing – missing to create difference. Black is normally used for framing, as it stands out against any other colour.

The tile stuck on the front of the cross – this indicates that I am whole in Christ – but different and I can be different in Christ.

The magazine pictures in which the base and the cross are wrapped in - pictures of lounge suites, book shelves - things I dream of - things you wouldn't expect to find on a cross - a very deliberate use of images.

Rhonda's story - let us hold that in our mind's eye.

The story of Bartimaeus - let us enter in, in order to hold that also in our mind's eye.

Bartimaeus must have become an expert interpreter of crowd noises. He would be familiar with the short, light steps of children, the heavier tread of men, the hesitant paces of old people and the sound of a woman's footsteps, sometimes clarified by a snatch of conversation or whiff of perfume which would settle the doubt.

This day he is the first to become aware of something unusual happening.

There is excitement in the air. A large crowd is coming. Quick enquiries soon reveal the answer: it is Jesus of Nazareth. The name of Jesus had probably gone like wildfire around the communities of sick and disabled in the area. Bartimaeus knows that this is his opportunity. Indeed, such a chance might never come again.

His sight is gone but there is nothing wrong with his voice. There is no point in getting up and pushing through the crowd. He would only get pushed aside and lose his sense of direction. In the confusion, Jesus might pass by. So he stays right where he is, sitting beside the road, and begins to shout at the top of his voice, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!

There is something slightly disturbing about shouting. To the orderly mind, it suggest a possible rebellion, an excess of emotion which is inappropriate.

One of my grandmothers, often said to my sister and I as we might have shouted something to one another - it is not becoming for young women to shout - tone yourselves down - we laughed.

It is something like this maybe when Bartimaeus shouts out. People try to hush him up. All around him people are telling him to shut up, but he can tell the bulk of the crowd is now almost directly opposite and he increases his volume. Over the noise of the crowd, Jesus hears his cry.

The story then continues with one of the most expressive and moving sentences in the Gospels.

The record simply says, 'Jesus stood still' (v.49).

What sensitivity, what quality of attentiveness is in that sentence.

Just as when the woman with the haemorrhage touched the fringe of his garment and the disciples were surprised that, hemmed in by the crowd and amidst the pushing and shoving, he had detected the touch which was an entreaty.

So now, above the babble and confusion, he hears the voice with its hint of desperation, 'have mercy on me.'

Jesus says, 'Call him here.' Now the attitude of the crowd changes. 'You're okay mate. He's heard you.' 'Come on, get up! He's calling for you.'

Bartimaeus springs up, throws off his cloak and many willing hands thrust him forward. The crowd parts and there is silence. Then Bartimaeus hears a voice which he knows must be the voice of Jesus, asking him a most surprising question. 'What do you want me to do for you?'

Jesus does not actively seek out blind people and offer them healing. He is not a healing evangelist of the modern type, who advertises healing as a regular part of his ministry. The truth is that Jesus would have passed by if Bartimaeus had not shouted out so loudly.

Even now, face to face, Jesus makes no assumptions about what the man wants. This shows a remarkable and gracious acceptance. Jesus does not take it for granted that the man wants his sight restored. He offers the man the dignity and independence of declaring his request.

Bartimaeus responds – 'Master, let me have my sight.' And Jesus says to him, 'Go your way; your faith has made you well.'

The words of Jesus are given fresh meaning when we think of them from the point of view of Bartimaeus. 'Go your way.' In his life as a blind person he had not been able to go his own way, but had depended upon others and had to follow in the ways that they chose. Now at last he can go on his own way. 'Immediately he regained his sight, and followed him on the way.'

The way that Bartimaeus chooses is the way of discipleship. This reminds us that the story of his healing is intended to be a symbol of parable of conversion. In becoming a disciple of Jesus, you are delivered from the

ignorance and helplessness of your former life and given direction and purpose in living.

John Hull, Professor of Religious Education and Practical Theology at Birmingham University writing from his lived experience of having been sighted but now blind, puts forward the view that "this symbol expresses the sighted person's point of view. To be delivered from the restrictions of blindness into the freedom of a sighted person's point of life is one of the most desirable transformations that a sighted person could imagine. Naturally he says, blind people get caught up in this point of view.

This puts blind people into a difficult position. What are we to say in reply to the question of Jesus, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Hull recounts receiving a particular letter in 1997.

Dear Mr Hull,

There is fortunately, a type of healing that is known as divine healing. It is done by Christians laying their hands on needy and afflicted persons. There is a man by the name of Peter Scothern who has been mightily used of God in divine healing. He goes to various areas, if invited to do so, to lay his hands on needy and afflicted persons.

A person, writing on your behalf, could invite Scothern to come to Birmingham University to lay his hands on you. If you then wished this you could also have a divine healing service in Birmingham, and you could inform all the needy and afflicted in Birmingham of the coming service. The needy persons of Birmingham will be as follows; blind, semi-blind, deaf and semi-deaf, dumb, those in continuous pain, diseased (especially those with diseases what are thought to be 'incurable' in the minds of most persons), allergic, those with bronchial troubles, those with mental troubles, and those who are physically abnormal, and many others with others things wrong with them....

And so the letter went on with further detail as to how special miracle prayer cloths could also be sent to be laid on the afflicted or abnormal part of the human anatomy....

Here is Professor John Hull's reply.

Dear Mr Morris

You wrote to me recently about the healing ministry of Mr Scothern. There are a number of misunderstandings in your letter which I thought you would like me to correct.

In the first place, you describe me as being needy and afflicted. Of course, in a sense I am needy, as are all human beings. However, I am much less needy than many. God has blessed me in many ways. I have a wonderful wife and five beautiful children. Because I have been able to do useful work for my employer, the University of Birmingham, I have a secure job and am able to maintain myself at a standard of living which is higher than many in our country. As for being afflicted, it is true that I am blind. However, I do not interpret my blindness as an affliction, but as a strange, dark and mysterious gift from God. Indeed, in many ways it is a gift that I would rather not have been given and one that I would not wish my friends or children to have. Nevertheless, it is a kind of gift. I have learnt that since I have passed beyond light and darkness, the image of God rests on my blindness. No sighted person can say that he or she is beyond light and darkness and yet we are told in Psalm 139, v 12 that God is beyond light and darkness. So in that respect it seems to me that it is blind people who are in the image of God rather than sighted people. Because of their dependence upon outward appearance and their confidence of being superior, it is often sighted people who are needy and many of them could do with a dose of blindness, like Tobit, or St Paul in the Bible, to bring them a kind of humility and insight which has not come to them through sight.

I am a Christian like yourself. My Christian life has been deepened since I lost my sight. This loss has helped me to think through many of my values in living, and in a way I have learnt a greater degree of intimacy with God.

Your letter distressed me because it showed so little sensitivity to the actual condition of blind people, and no awareness at all of the emotions and beliefs of Christian blind people. You assume that everybody wants to be like you, a sighted person, and you do not recognize that people are called into various states of life, some of which they would perhaps rather not have had, but they grow in faith and realize that whether they are sighted or blind they are in the hands of a merciful God.

Thank you for your letter and I hope that that my response will help you to consider again the Christian values behind your own letter." (47-48. *In the Beginning There was Darkness. A Blind Person's Conversation with the Bible.*)

O God, it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them – they are more than the sand: I come to the end – I am still with you.

Amen.