

LOW SUNDAY 2007

A couple of weeks back I was with Beatrice in St. Bartholomew's church preparing for a Mass usually attended by three or four students from the college. As we stood just inside the sacristy door Beatrice fixed me with her big blue eyes and said, 'Daddy, you know Jesus - Well he's not real is he?' It was a kind of private moment when she could just establish in her own mind that, although we went through all this elaborate conversation and ritual, it was just that - Jesus wasn't about to walk through the door.

But it wasn't only a good question for four year olds. As humans in 21st century Britain we can often be particularly skilled at hiding from the real, at inventing realities that protect us from the terror of human life. This last week I have been in Amsterdam for a few days hiding from the realities of everyday life. On Thursday I was in the Van Gogh museum together with hundreds of tourists, many of them American. It struck me that one of the ways we seek to protect ourselves from the horrors of human life, the horrors of nature is through art. Van Gogh gives us all a picture of the idealized artist; he spurned the academies and went to paint nature as it really is, to paint peasants in their own environment. In looking at these amazing paintings now there is a kind of vicarious excitement, the second hand thrill of watching someone get back to some kind of truth, some kind of reality about human life. Except for the fact that we do it in a vast modern air conditioned building, we are always at one remove from the reality. The other thing we keep at arms length is the truth that Van Gogh did not move into a sense of oneness with nature but rather into madness. His later paintings show up for us not nature's beauty but its darkness.

All of us need to construct these protective barriers of culture, of art, of tamed nature to let us exist without constantly being overtaken by fear and anxiety. Inevitably in our consumer shopping culture religion is offered to us as yet another choice, another option to make us feel better. The way big organizations offer a 'multi faith chaplaincy service' or large companies make sure there is provision for the spiritual needs of its workers is on the one hand an admission of the importance of religion but on the other a domesticating of religion as a kind of life-style choice, something that can form part of a healthy balanced cultural diet.

Of course the problem for the Christian faced with this is that it doesn't work to shout all the louder 'Hey, but I've got the best story, Jesus really does answer all your questions, he's the person you've been missing in your life all this time. Follow Jesus and all your fears will vanish. It doesn't work because we know it's not true, and so we are back with Beatrice's original question, as if I could lean conspiratorially across this lectern and whisper to you 'you know Jesus, he's not real is he? And you might be able to confirm the fabrication of the world we have created here.

There's a wonderfully dark Caravaggio painting of Doubting Thomas pointing a wary finger towards and almost into the wound on the side of Christ's body. This meeting of finger and wound of Christ is what we would all like to be able to do, to make the link between faith and reality, to know the truth of God in the fleshy reality of Christ's wounds. We can read about it, we can see Caravaggio's picture of it, and we can live its truth vicariously through the picture, but the picture never becomes reality.

But the wounded Christ remains for me a terrifyingly powerful image. Beatrice wanted to ask Fr. Thomas last week if Jesus' hands were still bleeding. I don't know where she gets all this stuff from - she must see it in pictures I suppose. While the question of bleeding wounds is rather medieval sounding, the questions link to Christ's woundedness is a good one. Because the image of the post resurrection Christ is not a picture of perfection, the perfection of God, but rather of a God who met us in our brokenness, the places in our lives where the sticking plasters of art and culture have given way to fear and anxiety. And God's response to that fear and anxiety is not an image of perfection, of a beauty and a truth we know we can never attain, but rather the wounded person of the resurrected Christ.

The wounded Christ of the Gospel this morning is real to us because he shows us a God who will travel with us even to the dark places of human suffering. I want to finish with those words from Jean Varnier that I quoted in the newsletter this month:

*"Jesus invites each one of us, through Thomas,
To touch not only his wounds,
But those wounds in others and in ourselves,
Wounds that can make us hate others and ourselves*

*And can be a sign of separation and division.
These wounds will be transformed into a sign of forgiveness
Through the love of Jesus
And will bring people together in love.
These wounds reveal that we need each other.
These wounds become the place of mutual compassion,
Of indwelling
And of thanksgiving.*

*We too will show our wounds
When we are with him in the kingdom,
Revealing our brokenness
And the healing power of Jesus.” Amen.*

FR.PHIL

*Jean Varnier ‘Drawn into the mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John’
2004, Darton, Longman and Todd*