

Sunday before Lent Year A

Jesus came and touched Peter, James and John and said: get up, do not be afraid.

Set that details from the story of the Transfiguration in the context of three stories from this week's news.

The first was from Kevin Connolly, BBC correspondent in Benghazi, who reported that one teacher told him she hoped each generation was becoming less fearful than the one which went before it.

Her own elderly mother, she said, had wanted to be taken downtown to see the celebrations that marked the birth of free Benghazi, but had been breathless with terror the whole time she was there. She was filled with a kind of nameless dread that harm would somehow befall them just for being out on the streets.

Maybe autocracy was becoming less and less possible. In the modern world dictatorship relies on the darkness of ignorance and every text message, every e-mail and every satellite news broadcast was a pinprick of light.

The reporter was encouraged. And then they spoke on the phone the following day. Would the reporter mind, the teacher asked, not using her name?

It was not, she said, so much for herself. Her parents were anxious that in Tripoli, Gaddafi's men were still watching and listening, waiting to pay the rebels back for their audacity when the world's attention wandered from the confusing stalemate into which Libya might well descend¹. Their hearts are still imprisoned by the fear which imprisons far more effectively than prison bars.

In Pakistan many of those from minority communities have been cowed by the country's blasphemy laws, used arbitrarily and cruelly against them. Remarkably, two politicians were prepared to take a stand against the increasingly powerful Islamist ascendancy. Both have now been killed, but only after taking a courageous stand.

This week the assassination of the Christian Shahbaz Bhatti followed that of the Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer, a Moslem, outside a cafe a few miles away on 4

¹http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00f115h/From_Our_Own_Correspondent_05_03_2011/

January. Bhatti had predicted his own death. In a farewell statement recorded four months ago, to be broadcast in the event of his death, he spoke of threats from the Taliban and al-Qaida.

But he vowed not to stop speaking for marginalised Christians and other minorities. "I will die to defend their rights," he said on the tape released to the BBC and al-Jazeera. "These threats and these warnings cannot change my opinions and principles."

Javaid Iqbal, a priest in this diocese from Pakistan, asked that we particularly remember his country this week. Javaid is also captain of the Diocesan cricket team, so I hope he won't think my third story absurdly flippant alongside the threats to his people. In this week's World Cup cricket match between England and Ireland, with a first win over England appearing nothing more than a forlorn dream, and his side reduced to 111-5, Kevin O'Brien strode to the crease and decided to have a go. And boy did he have a go. Viv Richards, Sachin Tendulkar, Brian Lara and Ricky Ponting have all attempted to bat with such grace and brutality in cricket's premier tournament, but none has come close to a century in 50 balls. The name O'Brien is now attached to the record for the fastest ton in World Cup history².

The story of the Transfiguration tells of Jesus' glorification on the mountaintop. It is a story of Jesus' transformation, but also the transformation of the disciples: Jesus came and touched them as they cowered and said 'Get up. And do not be afraid.'

Matthew's gospel, almost certainly written to a community under persecution, might justifiably have had fear, and its consequences, as a significant theme. In fact it is less of a preoccupation for Matthew than, for instance, for Luke. But those words: do not be afraid, or 'fear not' do come at particular and significant moments: the phrase props up Matthew's account at each end of the gospel, to Joseph told by the angel to take the pregnant Mary as his wife, to the women at the tomb, told by the angel to go and tell Jesus' followers that Jesus is risen....in other words, don't be afraid of

²<http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/cricket/angus-fraser-even-at-lords-it-was-time-for-a-guinness-ireland-beating-england-really-iisi-cricket-2230650.html>

what God is doing (which of course is the context of today's reading, the disciples cowering at the Jesus' glorification). Then right at the heart of Jesus teaching in Matthew 10 are the words: do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul... followed by and the reassurance that even the each hair of his followers heads were counted. Here is an instruction not to fear **what other humans are doing**.

But how could that transformation from fearfulness to fearlessness be achieved? Not, in Matthew's gospel, by some miraculous intervention, or some infusion of the Holy Spirit, but by something modern psychology would term a change of mindset.

Never mind the fact that you've been cuckolded, Joseph, and no doubt the gossips are out, and Mary clearly isn't to be trusted. Don't desert her, marry her

Never mind the fact, Mary and Mary that you've watched Jesus die slowly and agonizingly on the cross, ...he is not here, not because his body has been stolen by the Sanhedrin or the Romans. He is not here because he is risen.

Never mind the fact, Peter and James and John, that you have seen Moses and Elijah and heard the voice of the Lord and made absolute prats of yourselves by talking about booths. He is not just the rabbi from whom you have learnt so much, he is the Messiah

Joseph and Mary and Mary and Peter and James and John were caught up in events way out of their control, and Matthew's gospel shows them literally changing their minds when faced with extraordinary events.

The mother and daughter in Benghazi were beginning to change their minds. For 42 years freedom had been unthinkable. Now they could see it. But not yet allow themselves to feel or trust it. Kevin O'Brien, no doubt encouraged by his teammates, and with the experience of some coaching previously at the MCC, had changed his mind when he came out to bat. He knew that England weren't invincible. Shahbaz Bhatti, supported by many years of formation within the Roman Catholic

church in Pakistan, knew that, despite what the extremists wanted him to think, knew that there were worse things than being killed.

Get up, do not be afraid.

Viktor Frankl, writing on the horror of the concentration camps, where he his father, mother, brother and wife were killed, wrote 'when you can no longer change the situation, you are forced to change yourself'³. He noticed that it was not those who were most robust who coped best with life at Auschwitz, but those who developed a sense of spirituality, those who, in terrible surroundings held onto a life of inner riches and freedom and found a different reality. Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright, during the time of Soviet control, met with others in cafes, ordinary people, who brought poems, or reflections, or thoughts or songs, slowly creating a new culture, which simply didn't believe in communism any more. Havel saw that when enough people didn't believe in communism any more, it would collapse from within⁴.

Get up, do not be afraid

In parts of the Church of England there is considerable fear. The statistics are pretty straightforward: though there are some exceptional churches, cathedrals being among them, the average age of churchgoers continues to rise, a third of the clergy will retire in the next decade and there are not the ordinands in training to replace them. There are questions about how we can continue to support the parish system. But the biggest fear amongst the clergy, I suggest, is the inability to resist the mindset of decline in the church, of seeming irrelevance, of having nothing to say, and nobody to say it to. The Bishops and General Synod have therefore encouraged the church to use the coming months reset its priorities⁵

- To take forward the spiritual and numerical growth of the Church of England, including the growth of its capacity to serve the whole community

³Man's Search for Meaning (1946, Rider revised edn 2004)

⁴Vaclav Havel, Open Letters: Selected Prose 1965 – 1990 (London Faber and Faber 1991)

⁵GS 1815 Challenges for the New Quinquennium: A Report from the House of Bishops and the Archbishops' Council

- To reshape or re-imagine the Church's ministry for the century coming, so as to make sure that there is a growing and sustainable Christian witness in every local community
- To focus our resources where there is both the greatest need and the greatest opportunity.

Here is the Church of England corporately changing its focus, deliberately creating a new mindset

And what about us in relation to all this? There are the institutional imperatives, but also, for each of us, some much more personal stuff, some known to those around us, some to ourselves alone.

This week we begin our observance of Lent. Lent is a time for each of us to change our way of thinking, to hearing those words 'Get up, do not be afraid' and to make them real, no matter how dire or dreary the situation seems, how constraining or oppressive our context.

It will take practice, and time, and patience with ourselves and with each other. But through it we will recognize that God is not the end of the journey, or even in the journey, but is the journey we are taking.

Vivienne Faull

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