

Lent 5: 'SUFFERING' – John 21:15-19, 2 Cor 12:1-10

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves, / And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Anyone recognise that? (Jabberwocky). Nonsense poem by Lewis Carroll – famous for being nonsense.

Nonsense often very appealing:

- comedy e.g. Monty Python or Vic Reeves (swung down from ceiling with stuffed alsatian under his arm)
- Eric Morecambe and Andre Previn (right notes, not necessarily right order)
- It's a knockout/Jeux sans frontières – imagine an alien visiting earth and hearing Stuart Hall bellowing with laughter and shouting 'Here come the Belgians' as a pair in inflatable suits carried buckets of water down a slippery plastic course.

We like nonsense – but occasionally we come across Christian teaching that is so counter-cultural, so strange, it reads like nonsense. Today's theme is one of those.

Recap: Stations on Way to Freedom – DB written from prison 1944.

- 1st 2 verses 'discipline' and 'action' – sensible. Character that God can use, liberating feeling of bold and decisive action.
- Sensible order too – works well in that order.

Then get to verse 3 – dramatic change. Next station is 'suffering'. Shock – but what he says even more challenging: READ (SLIDE).

Let's be honest: on first reading, does this not read like nonsense? Suffering as a station on way to freedom? And not just that, not just *any* kind of suffering, but physical incapacity, whether through prison or otherwise: READ 'Your hands...ended'.

It certainly reads like nonsense in our society. Youth is one of the idols of our age. Old age is not venerated any more, indeed we are taught to see our declining physical powers as something to be viewed with profound regret. DB himself was only 38 when he wrote this. *How on earth can he talk of the 'sweet touch of freedom'?* This is our challenge for today.

And I do think we need to start by admitting that this understanding of suffering as a stage on the way to freedom is very difficult to get our head around. We might find it particularly hard to swallow in the context in which he describes it, i.e. the journey in human life from our period of vigorous action to a place where our action is largely 'ended' – how is that possibly freedom?

I can't give you a perfect answer to that – I don't think anybody can. There's a profound mystery here which we can dare to talk about but can probably only be confronted in the reality of experience. I'm 42 and have experienced some suffering in my life; but not the sort of depths DB is talking about. So I cannot, and will not, presume to talk glibly of things which we all shudder to go through. Tread carefully, WH Auden once wrote, for you tread on my dreams.

But I want to at least begin the conversation (and I think the conversations will be pretty good at Lent groups this week) by offering 3 headings to explore this morning: the hiddenness of God, the example of Jesus and the power of Jesus.

So firstly the Hiddenness of God. What do I mean by that? Well, the term is something that has been coined by philosophers and theologians to describe the uncomfortable truth that God is quite hard to grasp. If God is real and made the world, why is he so hard to find? Why doesn't he make it more obvious? Church has historically had 2 answers to this question: the first is that God is quite obvious after all: creation; conscience; miracles & resurrection. Good answer, but not whole story. Risks being glib, and many people disagree that this is proof.

2nd answer takes reverse view. God is God and we aren't – therefore if he is really God he must be hard to find, because he is not like us. There must be something other-worldly and mysterious. Interesting that while church tries to make Jesus and faith as accessible and comprehensible as possible (and rightly so), Jesus often didn't. To the man who ran up to him and asked to follow him he said: are you sure? 'Foxes have holes...' The rich young ruler was similarly disappointed. When the crowd was whipped up for the new Messiah he invariably dampened their expectations: he chose Zacchaeus, a hated collaborator, as his party host. He arrived on Palm Sunday and immediately left (Mark 11). He then turned over tables in the temple, not the Roman barracks.

And crucially he also said some things that turned conventional thinking upside down: blessed are the mourners. The first will be last. The kingdom is like a mustard seed, a tiny pathetic seed. It's like treasure hidden in a field. It's not obvious. There's something weird and strange and upside down about seeking God, about following Jesus. At one level it defies logic. And here is a classic example of that: suffering is a path to freedom. For all that we might say 'no, it isn't', it fits with our upside-down Messiah to try and believe that it is. There's a mystery to our understanding of God's will: 'his ways are not our ways.' (Is 55) It's either too strange to be true; or so strange it must be true. Only God could come up with something like that.

So where can we turn to find a context in which we can say that DB might actually be right? Turn briefly to our 2 passages in turn and think about the example of Jesus, and the power of Jesus.

The example of Jesus – John 21. Key verses here v18-19 – READ. Jesus ends the gospel as he begins it, calling his disciples to follow him. But what does it mean to follow him? Well, after the cross and resurrection there is a whole new dimension. Jesus suffered and died before rising again. To follow him therefore means... well, Peter, Jesus says, you do the math. That's what connects this strange phrase Jesus uses in verse 18: READ. And John, listening in to this conversation, gets it, and records it for us.

Jesus himself suffered exactly the same just a couple of weeks previously. He was bound and taken where he didn't want to go. So to follow Jesus for Peter will mean the same. In fact, first it will mean ACTION (to pick up on DB's poem) – Jesus commissions Peter to lead the church in this same passage: 'Feed my sheep'. But ultimately it will also mean the next stage too – SUFFERING as the final path to freedom and glory. 'Follow me,' the crucified Messiah says. Take up your cross and in doing so you will find your life.

This whole strand of Jesus' teaching, which runs as a thread through the gospels is one we always find uncomfortable. And yet it is undeniably there. It is too much to swallow for most people, indeed for most Christians. **The vast majority of us follow the way of Christ for what it offers. Only a very few follow Christ for it costs. (REPEAT)**

I think here is an insight to what Jesus really means by the mustard seed. To take the teachings of Jesus literally is so radical, so costly, that only a very few crazy people actually dare to do it. People like St Paul, or St Anthony the original monk, or DB himself.

And of course these are the people whose names go down in Christian history. Most of us who think largely of what Jesus offers will lead fruitful lives, and go to be with the Lord in heaven, largely remembered only by family and friends. The crazy few who give up everything, suffer anything for the sake of their Lord may or may not achieve notoriety in their lifetime (though many don't – e.g. the 19th century missionaries who left the UK with their belongings in a coffin because their average life expectancy from that point was 6 months). But their example lasts forever. They are the true heirs of what Tom Sine calls the 'mustard seed conspiracy'. And at the heart of that conspiracy is a conviction that suffering is the path to glory. Whatever it takes, for the glory of God.

But there is another perspective too. Because we have **not just Jesus' example, but Jesus' power too**. Takes us 2 Corinthians 12. Paul talks candidly both about his extraordinary spiritual experiences, but also of his frailty. He was afflicted by what he calls 'a thorn in the flesh' which God did not take away. Paul the great healer was unable to pray successfully for his own healing. But in it God revealed a deeper truth: READ v9. God isn't looking for superheroes, people with extreme talents and perfect health. God is looking for ordinary, broken people with a heart that trusts God through which he can work his power. That way He gets the glory.

If God works through broken people, we can't say: oh it's because so and so is so amazing, so talented. Instead we give glory to God: Jesus is amazing, Jesus did it. Jesus changed that person's life, Jesus healed that person, Jesus helped those two people make up with each other, Jesus multiplied our finances so that somehow we broke even. Christ's power is made perfect in weakness.

That's what DB is getting at too – there's a key phrase you may have missed first time: 'you sigh in relief, your cause committing to stronger hands.' Why is DB contented? Because in his weakness all he can do now is commit his cause to stronger hands. God's hands. It's no longer about him, about his efforts, his energy, his gifts – it's all God's now. His cause is in stronger hands.

And whilst we may never become the extreme disciple that Paul was, or DB or any of those great heroes of the faith, we can know this truth at work: Whatever our weakness, if our hearts are surrendered to God, he can work powerfully through it. He can take our periods of suffering and bring good out of them. His strong hands will bring us through them and maybe even bring good and blessing out of them.

We've thought mostly about the big picture today – about seeing our whole life journey from discipline to action to suffering. And let's not lose hold of that. It raises big questions about how we journey into our later years, and in the study notes for this week you'll get the chance to think more about that. But we can also read this in another way. We can take specific life situations and think of them in the light of DB's poem.

There may be something in your life where you feel that your action has ended. You've fought with something for a long time, or you've struggled with something, or you've been involved with something. And you've come to the end of the road with it. And you're not sure what to do. It may be – and I only say *may*, it's key to seek God's discernment in this – it may be that actually God is saying that your period of action in this matter is ended. And the words you need to hear today is what DB says next: 'you sigh in relief, your cause committing to stronger hands, so now you may rest contented.'

Maybe it's time to give it to God. Maybe it's time to experience the relief, the freedom of not having to carry it anymore but just trust it into the Lord's hands.

If that's you today, can I encourage you to do just that. God desires for us all to feel the sweet touch of freedom – perhaps that is your path to freedom today. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

SILENCE – then 2 songs to respond to God. (PRAY AFTER SONGS)