

14th March 2021, Lent 4, Mothering Sunday: 'A Sacrificial journey' (Isaiah 53)

Today I'm walking a tightrope. Actually I've always wanted to have a go at that, but my family will tell you that I find it difficult enough just walking round the house without knocking things over, so I suspect this is one thing on my bucket list that will never come to reality.

The tightrope I'm talking about is the clash of themes. On the one hand, today we want to celebrate and give thanks for mums and the others who've cared for us – and on the other, our Lent theme is that of sacrifice, with one of the hardest hitting passages in the whole of the bible.

It's a tension, a conundrum... But actually, as I've prepared for this week, it's struck me that the two so often go hand-in-hand. To experience joy we have to run the risk of experiencing pain as well – and vice versa. If we try to construct our lives to shut off pain, we also find that we unexpectedly cut off the capacity for joy as well. Love is costly – it brings us the highest highs, but also the greatest challenges as well.

Anyone who's a parent knows this. Indeed, anyone who has a family will relate to this. Our news this week has been dominated by the pain and dysfunction which sits right at the heart of the world's most famous family. There's a temptation to take sides in all this, though to be honest the truth is usually somewhere in the middle isn't it? The better summary I think is the simple observation that **love is both beautiful and costly.**

And at the heart of the troubles of the royal family is **the cost of sacrifice.** For all that their lives seem privileged, each of them has been called to make significant sacrifices – ones they largely did not choose for themselves – and the personal cost of those sacrifices is what has led to where we are now.

Is it right to demand sacrifice, or can it only be freely chosen? That is a difficult question, and underlies much of the pain in our world. Who *chooses* pain? Who chooses sacrifice?

This week I've also been watching a new TV series: 'The Terror'. It tells the story of two ships trying to navigate the holy grail of shipping in the 19th century – the legendary North-West passage, which, if ever found, would save thousands of miles travelling to the Pacific, and effectively render the country which found it undisputed mastery of the seas.

Thousands of people died in the 18th and 19th centuries trying to find it, and the toll of human suffering in repeated failed attempts was immense. But what I've found compelling in the TV drama is the narrative of heroism. These were souls who chose the path of likely death for the promise of glory. They weighed up the risks of sacrifice and decided that it *was* worth it. There was a purpose to their sacrifice, they were part of a bigger story.

Which brings us back to our tightrope today. Underneath the language of both thanksgiving and pain is **the biblical idea of redemptive sacrifice** – the idea that, for all the pain that sacrifice brings, there is a purpose to it, one which in fact cannot be achieved without it:

Mothers and indeed all parents accept the sacrifices and challenges of parenthood because it is a covenant of love, it offers the joy of relationship, and also the satisfaction of nurturing and shaping lives who will one day themselves go out into the world. There will almost certainly be significant pain as well, but *we cannot have the love, the joy or the sense of achievement without it.*

And in our passage in Isaiah we see our ultimate model of redemptive sacrifice: God's chosen rescuer comes to our world as a 'man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering'. He chooses the path of sacrifice – not for himself, but for us, and because it is also the path to freedom, to healing and to glory. It's really important to read beyond v6 in this chapter – the suffering Messiah is rewarded with light and life and glory. **After death comes resurrection.**

And we too affirm this today. As humans we are called to walk the journey of costly love: with our families, with our friends, with our communities. It promises pain alongside joy, and many of us are only too aware of that at the moment. But ultimately God never asks us to do anything he didn't do first. We find strength in knowing that **God walked this journey before us, and will empower his people to do the same.** God's grace is made perfect in weakness.

And by his wounds we are healed. Hallelujah.