

Sermon at St Mary's Barnes

4th Sunday after Trinity

24 June 2018

There is a classic play by Samuel Beckett called *Happy Days*. It's currently being revived in Manchester and the theatre critic, Sam Marlowe, described it like this: 'Happy Days is penetrating theatre about what it means to be human. Compassionate, bruising and ugly-beautiful' (Times 1.6.18). This encapsulation of the human condition is not a mile away from the litany of hardships, but at the same time delight in the Lord, of which we heard in today's reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians (2Cor 6.1-13). It's a litany to which you might apply Sam Marlowe's hybrid adjective 'ugly-beautiful' and it's one that is bruising in both an active and a passive sense. In other words, Paul had been a bruiser himself and paid a price for this; but he had also been bruised by afflictions of both body and mind. He speaks of 'hardships, calamities...labours and sleepless nights'. This is strong language, but would we not all recognise what Paul calls these 'afflictions' as being part of our own individual human condition?

Each of us is faced with personal challenges, which might be called hardships, whether of our own making or imposed upon us by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. And we all know what calamities are – breaking a precious object at one end of the spectrum, to acute personal distress at the other. Labours come in many forms. They can bring with them job satisfaction, but they can too be irksome or exhausting. And as for sleepless nights, don't we all know about them?

In the play *Happy Days*, the heroine, Winnie, remains upbeat through her soliloquy of remembrance of times past, but she is in fact first half-buried and later buried up to her neck in sand. You could say a typically surreal Samuel Beckett scene. What he portrays is a person, on the face of it fully engaged with life, but in fact literally entombed by life. It is this entombment that accounts for that hybrid adjective 'ugly-beautiful'. And, while I don't want to suggest that entombment is an essential part of the human condition, far from it, I think we must recognise the afflictions inherent in the human condition. I've already mentioned some of them. They might be relatively trivial, but they can too be profoundly debilitating.

The first chapter of Richard Harries' book *The Beauty and the Horror* is entitled 'Life – so astonishing and so appalling'. And, as you know, he goes on to explore the search for God in a suffering world. For my part I've been concerned, in

preparing this sermon and prompted by the apostle Paul, to face up to the darker side of our lives. We all have what Carl Jung calls a shadow side; and the problem isn't that the shadow's there; the problem's when we deny it. Because this shadow side has been described as 'our psychological compost' (Alastair McIntosh p317). We can be nourished by it in the sense that it stops us being judgmental about the sins and wickedness around us. It stops us projecting shadows on to others and to recognise our essential interconnections in community, that we're all bound in with one another.

The psalmist asks 'who can tell how often I offend? O cleanse me from my secret faults'(Ps19.12). In other words, it's not so much a question of identifying and seeking forgiveness for specific acts of unfaithfulness to God and to our fellow human beings. Of course, we need to do this, but confessing specific failings, I suggest, is the easy bit. The psalmist speaks of secret faults, those attitudes of mind and heart that stand in the way of loving as we ought. Feelings of pride, envy or resentment, for example, put up barriers which block that openness of heart for which Paul makes a special plea. 'We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians', he says (6.11), 'our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return open wide your hearts also'.

Paul's two letters to the Corinthians are thought to be an editor's compilation of a whole correspondence between Paul and Christians in Corinth that took place in the mid-50s of the first century, just a few years after Paul had himself established the church there. Corinth was a truly cosmopolitan city in the Hellenistic world. For some one hundred years before Paul got there it had been a major colony of the Roman empire in the eastern Mediterranean, so it's not surprising that it should have been the place selected by Paul for the establishment of a new community of Christian believers, both Jew and Gentile. This early church evidently flourished, and Paul was able to move on from Corinth to Ephesus. However, social and economic stratification within the Corinthian church, which probably mirrored Corinthian society at large, gave rise to conflict both within the church and with Paul, who was distressed to hear of such troubles. Accordingly, he wrote, at some length both in protest and to reinforce his convictions about the heart of the Christian way. Indeed, it is in these writings that we have the earliest account of Jesus's last supper.

But the point I want to emphasise against this all too human background is that, in today's reading from 2 Corinthians we catch a glimpse of Paul's shadow side. It's not just a matter of the afflictions he suffered. It's also his pride in what

perhaps he secretly regarded as his church, his creation, and his resentment that fellow Christians were straying from the path he had laid out. Here is the ugly-beautiful aspect of the apostle Paul.

What might Jesus have said to Paul as he fulminated against the Corinthians? Well, may be today's gospel (Mark 4.35-41) gives us a clue. There is Jesus, evidently exhausted by his ministry and taken, as we read, 'just as he was' (v36) in the boat with his disciples. He fell fast asleep on a cushion, oblivious of the storm that threatened to overwhelm the boat. Being woken by the disciples he was quick to take the necessary action, miraculous as it seemed to them, but then questioned their fear and admonished them for lack of faith. Might he not have said the same thing to Paul? And doesn't he continually seek to remove our fear of our shadow sides and reassure us that, in every possible situation, we should both heed Paul's appeal that we open wide our hearts and trust in the Lord our God.