



Wednesday 20th April 2011

## Victims and Victimisers

### STARTING OUT

Our final thoughts about the Unreconciled in Holy Week are about those who are damaged and hurt by the actions of others, and those who use their power to hurt them. In our world today, many people attract the label 'victim'. There are the victims of natural disasters such as Haiti earthquake and the Australian floods, victims of poverty, hunger, disease and injustice, victims of crime and violence and victims of circumstance such as becoming housebound or suffering because of the economic downturn. But although we use this word 'victim' of people who find themselves in these situations, not everyone allows that label to define them. Some people refuse to be victims no matter what their circumstances and use whatever skills and determination they have to retain their integrity, their hope, and sense of self. Often, it's faith which makes the difference: although they may be brutally victimised by others, some people find faith sustains them and helps them resist falling into passivity, hopelessness or despair. On the other hand, some people *want* to be seen as victims and retreat into a state of helplessness, because it feels too hard to get beyond what has happened to them. So this reminds us that not all 'victims' are the same and that both victims and victimisers can have different motives and outlook. When we reach out to others to help them, we have to find out what they really need and what they are ready to accept from us.

So, for example, when Jesus meets the sick man by the pool of Bethesda (John 5.1-8), he asks him: do you actually want to be healed? It's an astute question: because healing also depends on the person becoming responsible for his new life and new start. The man makes an excuse about why he's never able to go into the pool for healing. There's always someone else who pushed in and stops him taking his turn. Some people have trouble with responsibility: a new life can be a scary prospect. But Jesus challenges him and the man (literally) rises to the challenge by getting up and walking away, healed.

That's a question for us too, as we leave Lent behind and journey through Holy Week to Easter. We too are the Unreconciled and have been preparing to meet Jesus the reconciler and to see for ourselves his healing power by the cross. But there's a question he has to ask us: do we want to be healed? Are we prepared to live fully in the future, liberated by the resurrection? Are we really ready to be Easter people?



## Reflection

- Where do you see victimisers at work today and who is suffering at their hands? Would you be prepared to stand up to or so do something about those who victimise others?
- Who do you see as victims in your community, this country, or the world? What more could be done to find out what they need and help them to get it?
- Have there been times in your life when you have considered yourself as a victim (or a victimiser)? If so, what did that feel like, and what did it feel like to change?
- How will the journey with the Unreconciled this Easter challenge *your* life as a Christian?

## Going deeper

This theme of victims and victimisers is also played out during the final hours of Jesus' life, as he is arrested, accused, put on trial and condemned to death. There are all kinds of power struggles for control of authority, control of the people, and even for control of the truth and everyone expects Jesus to play the game, especially about the central question of whether he is, or claims to be, 'The King of the Jews'. But Jesus does not play the human game. Instead he submits to his victimisers, because his purpose and his understanding of God's will go beyond his victimisers' imagining. We also see this reflected in some contemporary figures who submit to victimisation in order to make a different vision possible for others, such as Mahatma Ghandi or Fr Maximilian Kolbe.

## Reflection

The events of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion are adversarial, with people shouting, arguing, protesting, mocking and acting violently, creating rifts between different groups. Where do you see that happening in the world today?

We can argue that although Jesus submitted to his victimisers, he never became a victim. Can you think of other people who have been victimised by others but have refused to become victims? What do you think we can learn from such people?

What is it about Jesus' part in this drama that enables us to call him the Reconciler? What do these events teach us about Christian reconciliation?

## Celebrating the Bible - I

John 13: 21-32

### KJV

<sup>21</sup>When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.

<sup>22</sup>Then the disciples looked one on another, doubting of whom he spake.

### NRSV

<sup>21</sup>After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' <sup>22</sup>The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. <sup>23</sup>One of his disciples—the one



**(KJV continued)**

<sup>23</sup>Now there was leaning on Jesus bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved.

<sup>24</sup>Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him, that he should ask who it should be of whom he spake.

<sup>25</sup>He then lying on Jesus breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it?

<sup>26</sup>Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon.

<sup>27</sup>And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly.

<sup>28</sup>Now no man at the table knew for what intent he spake this unto him.

<sup>29</sup>For some of them thought, because Judas had the bag, that Jesus had said unto him, Buy those things that we have need of against the feast; or, that he should give something to the poor.

<sup>30</sup>He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night.

<sup>31</sup>Therefore, when he was gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him.

<sup>32</sup>If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself, and shall straightway glorify him.

**(NRSV continued)**

whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; <sup>24</sup>Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

<sup>25</sup>So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, ‘Lord, who is it?’ <sup>26</sup>Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. <sup>27</sup>After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘Do quickly what you are going to do.’ <sup>28</sup>Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. <sup>29</sup>Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the festival’; or, that he should give something to the poor. <sup>30</sup>So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

<sup>31</sup>When he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

This passage shows us that Jesus was trapped in a web of jealousy, deceit and oppression by the religious and political military powers. He was about to be betrayed by one of his own disciples, condemned at a mock trial, abused, humiliated and crucified. He was the powerless victim. But here he shows that he refuses to accept victimhood.

He reveals that he knows what will happen and who is involved. He chooses to accept the path ahead but as a free agent so that he gives his life to accomplish God’s purposes. He can do this because he knows God is working through him to reveal his saving love for the world and that God will honour him. He refuses to retaliate against Judas or stop him, so Jesus remains free – Judas’s behaviour does not manipulate or distract Jesus.



## Some questions to think about:

- Imagine how Jesus felt about Judas.
- How does this passage present Jesus as a victim who refuses to be victimised?
- Have you ever been seriously provoked but managed not to retaliate? If so, why did you not hit back or try to even the score? What skills or values do we need not to get involved in victimising actions?

## Celebrating the Bible - II

(This is the same reading as for the Daily Service for for today on Radio 4)

### Genesis 22:5-12

#### KJV

<sup>5</sup>And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

<sup>6</sup>And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

<sup>7</sup>And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

<sup>8</sup>And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

<sup>9</sup>And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

<sup>10</sup>And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

<sup>11</sup>And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

<sup>12</sup>And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

#### NRSV

<sup>5</sup>Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' <sup>6</sup>Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>7</sup>Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' <sup>8</sup>Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup>When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. <sup>11</sup>But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' <sup>12</sup>He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.'





This story deals with passions, beliefs and drives that many people find difficult to imagine today. On the one hand there is the need to survive, to perpetuate the tribe, to battle hardship, disease and difficulty to bring children into the world and raise them to inherit. On the other hand there is an on-going relationship with God on whom the people of Israel rely absolutely for purpose and meaning about what they are doing and why. For them, the relationship is tested through obedience, through relationship, and through worship and ritual, such as the sacrificial offerings which demonstrate their faith and trust.

But what if those two profound purposes clash? What if God demands something unimaginable? What if the divine purpose suddenly turns into something utterly destructive instead of loving, protecting and creative? The people of this time believed absolutely in the destructive power of God as well as the loving protector of the chosen people. In this story, then, Abraham is faced with not just sacrificing his son, but his entire future. Nothing of what is demanded makes sense, yet he obeys. Defiance is unthinkable, - how can a holy people go forward without trusting God? Yet in the end it is not what Abraham does, but what God does, that matters. In the place where all of us eventually go to face death, not knowing for certain what that means for us, trust in God makes a difference – and God saves.

## Some questions to think about:

- Imagine you were Isaac, what would you think was happening?
- What does this story tell us about ideas of sacrifice and reconciliation?
- Do you think Jesus remembered this story in the last days of his life? What do you think it might have meant to him in terms of what God wanted him to do?

## Following Jesus

The hymn *Alleluia, sing to Jesus* talks about Jesus as ‘both Priest and Victim’ and this points to another way the atonement has been understood. Many important Jewish religious rituals were based on sacrifice in Jesus’ day and the religious law laid down what kind of sacrifice was necessary to cement the connection between human beings and God. The most powerful sacrificial event was the Passover, when the Jews remembered (and still remember today) how God spared them from death in Egypt when the blood of the sacrificed lamb was splashed on the lintels of their homes. The re-enactment and remembering allowed them to be sure that God is faithful and saves his people.

So at the Last Supper, Jesus transforms the Passover. His body and blood are to be sacrificed for the salvation of the whole world, but in order to remember and make present this salvation, his followers will not need to kill animals, but to perform the ritual with bread







and wine. This, then, is the institution of the Eucharist that is commemorated in Holy Week on Maundy Thursday in many Christian traditions. On Good Friday, the sacrifice takes place 'once and for all' as Jesus becomes the sacrificial victim which saves the people (see Hebrews 10). This view of the events of the crucifixion is most strongly seen in John's Gospel, where John puts the crucifixion on the day of Preparation for Passover (John 19.14, 31, 42) so that Jesus dies along with the sacrificial lambs and fulfils the Passover. He becomes the 'Lamb that was slain' in Revelation. He is the 'Lamb of God'.

But if, in this way of viewing the crucifixion, Jesus is the Victim of the sacrifice, was Jesus ever a victim in any other way? Since he chose this path by submitting to God's will in the garden of Gethsemane, we can say that he refuses victimhood and holds to an ultimate purpose throughout (see John 10.17-18). This is not to minimise the physical pain and the sense of spiritual abandonment he suffered, but the resurrection demonstrates that the evil of the world can be overcome. The disciples encounter the risen Jesus not as victim of human evil, but as friend, master, teacher, reconciler, encourager, bringer of new hope, joy and peace.

To return to where we began at Ash Wednesday: death can make victims of all of us, but through Jesus we do not have to remain trapped as victims of time and decay, but rise with him to experience new life with God.

## Some questions for reflection

- Does this way of thinking about Jesus as a sacrifice for all help you make sense of Easter?
- Was Jesus ever a Victim?

## Reflection

We have looked at three perspectives on Jesus' death and resurrection which complement our theme of the Unreconciled. What other ways of thinking about it are important in your tradition or in your faith which helps you think about the Easter events?

What kinds of emotions or thoughts do you associate with going to church at Easter? Joy, fear, gratitude, awe, boredom, sorrow, confusion, love, hope?

What have you gained from the time of this Lent and Holy Week? What will you be taking forward into the Easter celebrations?



## Prayer

Lord,  
 You entered the world of the Unreconciled  
 You were despised and rejected  
 Terrible things were done to you  
 No one fought to save you  
 And you did not save yourself.  
 Yet through your suffering  
 Others believed  
 And you promised the criminal  
 He would walk with you in Paradise.  
 Help us to raise the victimised  
 From their place of desolation  
 And give them the hope  
 of your risen glory. Amen

## What is going to change?

You can use this section to gather your thoughts and to plan out any future projects on this theme.

- **Where is the seed of new life?** What gifts has God given us to help us care for the victimised and understand the behaviour of victimisers?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to reach out to the victimised and restore them to equality with all other people?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify one reconciling action we can commit to which will help improve the lives of victimised people in our communities.
- **How can we nurture it?** How can we support that reconciling action and make sure it follows through?
- **What will we hope to see?** What will be changed at the end of this process and what difference should it have made?

## Going further

Brian Castle, *Reconciling One and All: God's Gift to the World* (SPCK, 2008)

John V Taylor, *The Uncancelled Mandate* (Church House Publishing, 1998)

David Atkinson, *Jesus, Lamb of God* (SPCK, 1996)

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Photo of *The Unreconciled* (The Cross and broken glass): CTBI / Vicki & Chuck Rogers / Phil Dragash 