

Suicide

24 2 13

Almighty God,
you show those in error the light of your truth,
that they may return to the light of righteousness:
grant to all who are admitted
 into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things;
 that are contrary to their profession,
and follow such things as are agreeable to the same.

Our text may be found in Matthew's gospel chapter 7 and verses 1 and 2:

'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make
 you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.'

On 31st December, 2012, at 21.15, sixteen-year-old Jordan Cobb, on his way to a New Year's Eve party with some friends was crossing the Tamar on the Plymouth – Torpoint ferry. As they approached the shore, Jordan jumped into the cold darkness and was never seen again alive. It took sixteen days for the Emergency Rescue Services to find his body in the water.

Whether Jordan literally committed suicide or it was simply a matter of adolescent stupidity, of accepting a £100 bet to show he could swim ashore, the adjourned inquest has yet to decide. But this morning, I'd like to talk briefly (as ever) on the

subject of suicide. I was given an article by the Revd Dr Giles Fraser formerly of St Paul's Cathedral and currently Priest-in-charge of St Mary's Newington, South London. In it, he traces the evolving Christian response to suicide in the light of contemporary culture.

He points out that there is no direct condemnation of suicide in the Bible. Neither Samson (Judges 16 v30) or Saul (I Samuel 31 v4) are condemned for taking their own lives: one by bringing the roof of the temple to Dagon down on his own head; the other by falling on his sword. Condemnation is rooted in the teaching of Augustine who applied the Sixth Commandment to suicide – 'Thou shalt not kill' – and later Aquinas who regarded suicide as unpardonable. The rule forbidding suicides' burial in sacred ground was a sign of the Church's condemnation of suicide. A softer line begins with the Reformation and is found for example in the writing of the Metaphysical poet and Dean of St Paul's, John Donne, who in 1608 wrote in his essay 'Biothanatos' (a title which combines two Greek words: 'bios' meaning life; and 'thanatos' death) encouraging 'a charitable interpretation of theyr Action who dye so'.

Suicide sadly is a growing contemporary issue. The reduction of the number of Paracetamol tablets that can be bought at any one time in England was a response to people choosing to overdose on these readily available pills as an easy albeit unpleasant way to kill oneself. It has had the effect of reducing the number of successful suicides from this method but sadly not the numbers trying to do so by this means!

What leads so many people to want to take their own lives? I don't know. Perhaps, the financial crisis with the increased difficulty of getting and keeping a job and of making ends meet. Perhaps, it is the breakdown of family life, the lack of support from family and friends in times of need. Perhaps, it is the unattainable dreams of a consumerist, materialist society where everyone can see what they don't have and will never be able to afford. Perhaps, it is the triple problem of drink and drugs and sex – youngsters who are addicted to the one and unsure of themselves about the other. I just don't know why some people are so unhappy that they want to end it all. To my mind, life is such a wonderful, exciting gift that to return it 'unopened' is a very 'sad' thing to do and speaks volumes about the personal blackness and depths of depression and of despair in which an individual may find themselves trapped.

And what of us? If we know someone who is down and in despair, are we, can we be there for them? If we know someone whose loved one has committed suicide, are we there for them? As Christians, I believe we worship a God of love. John sums up the gospel in just one verse – chapter 3 and verse sixteen – and I quote what you probably know off by heart: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him, would not perish but have ever lasting life.' For me, God the Father – Abba – is best exemplified in the action of the father of the prodigal son who looking out, spotted his now ragged, dirty, barefoot son limping slowly home and even before the boy could reach their house, he rushed out to greet him with a hug of love.

It is easy to judge and condemn, to be like the legally-minded Pharisees and to say with certainty what is right and who is in the wrong. But unless you are in someone else's shoes, and see things from their point of view, how can we ever know what things are like for them? So let me leave you to reflect on our text today, a verse from Matthew's gospel on which I have said nothing: **'Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.'**

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

24th February, 2013

G: Sermon 27 : Suicide

