

Good Grief

8 12 13

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power,
and come among us
and with great might succour us;
that whereas through our sins and wickedness
we are grievously hindered
in running the race that is set before us,
your bountiful grace and mercy
may speedily help and deliver us.

Our text may be found in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 15 and verse 13:

'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

It's Thursday morning. I'm in the bathroom shaving. I pick up my bottle of after shave, 'Intense' from Next, to check how much is left and quickly calculate it should last me till I open my Christmas presents. Wrong ! It slips from hand to drop and break its neck on the unforgiving bathroom floor ! And that, my friends, is life. You just never know just when something's going to go wrong, just when we're going to lose something precious or cheap, just when we're going to suffer a minor hurt or a major trauma.

So it was with real interest that I read an article given to me by Caroline Hewitt from the weekend Guardian from mid August written by a psycho therapist, Max Epstein, and entitled 'The trauma of being alive'. Epstein roots his argument in the grief and sense of loss that his 88 year-old-mother is feeling at the death of her second husband, Mark Epstein's father, some four and half years earlier. She feels guilty that she's not yet got over it. In the background, there is the fact of her first husband, a college sweetheart, had, in his twenties, died suddenly of a heart attack. Back then, it had taken her, she said, some ten years to get over her loss !

And there we have what it is to be human: we're born; we live; we die. We are open to feel real joy and to experience real pain. If we can love, then we can also hurt and be hurt. Life gives us the opportunity to feel, to touch and to be touched. And that is why it is such a gift to be alive, awake and aware of what is going on around us, to us and to those we love and to what we love.

And the problem ? How we cope. How do we deal with what Mark Epstein terms 'the trauma of being alive' ? The word 'trauma,' of course, is rooted in the Greek word, 'τραυμα', which means 'wound' and in terms of psychoanalysis, a trauma is 'a disturbing experience' or 'mental shock'. As a teacher one of my catchphrases was nightmare. I like the French, 'cauchemar', and the Italian, 'incubo', but my favourite is the German word - 'Alptraum', not a trauma on the scale of the Alps but David Boggis tells me a bad dream induced by an naughty 'elf' sitting on your chest !

So how can we best confront what is clearly painful, distressing, disturbing ? Perhaps by being 'kind' to ourselves ? Perhaps by accepting the fact that we are hurt, helps us to get the hurt in perspective. Instead of feeling guilty that we are in pain and suffering the hurt of real loss, instead of denying the pain, we accept the pain in the knowledge it is the price we pay for being alive. There is no one way of facing bereavement, the death of someone we love, the loss of the one we may love more than we love our very self. The time it takes to adjust to the gap that has opened up in our lives inevitably varies from person to person and according to individual circumstances. However much one might value the English 'stiff upper lip', being able to cry in public, to be upset in company, is part of a healthy expression of our emotions !

And so to our text from Romans:

'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

Paul is blessing us. He blesses us with joy and peace in believing in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour so that we might have hope. Powerful stuff: the joy of being alive; the hope of the life to come; the peace of knowing that we are loved by God through the Incarnation of his Son and that we can best love ourselves through the love of others. Of course, life is costly – if it didn't cost, would it really be worth anything ? But if being wounded is a necessary fact of life, then learning how best to bear our wounds would seem to be a good idea. For me, it is the sense of being connected to God that makes being connected with this world bearable.

What about you ?

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

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G: Sermons 29 : Good Grief

