

In the course of life we are gifted with chance meetings, chance encounters that can have an impact far beyond that particular moment. The chance meeting between man and woman, one among many such meetings, that blossoms into love, into marriage, into lifelong commitment and all that flows from that in shared sorrow, shared joys, shared pain, shared life and destiny.

Then there are those lesser moments that none the less help shape our thinking in crucial areas of our philosophy of life and our spirituality. I often think back to a chance encounter that myself and a number of 2nd year students had with the late Michael Ramsey, who at that time had just retired as Archbishop of Canterbury., whom we had gone to hear speaking at Queen's University in Belfast. The whole issue of doubt came up and we asked him had he ever doubted. 'Doubted? Oh yes. Oh yes. And each time I take myself to the foot of the cross.'

This has always served to remind me that the Cross, my contemplation of it, my understanding of it, is, has to be, more than just an intellectual exercise. Not that I switch off my brain, not that I don't use my mind to seek to understand, to deepen my thinking. As I think of Michael Ramsey making his own personal pilgrimage to the foot of the cross, I am reminded that the cross, the events of the cross, the drama of the cross touches something deep within us.

In previous Holy Weeks we have reflected on the events of the Cross through the eyes of the different characters in the story. This year we are reflecting on it through the words of Mrs Alexander's hymn, 'There is a green hill far away'. I often think hymns can be more powerful than sermons in developing our spiritual formation. The combination of poetry and music mean the words, the

thoughts stay in our minds long after the most eloquent of sermons. We can mull over the words, consciously, even subconsciously.

There is something in the Cross that is beyond immediate comprehension and we try to explain, we try to comprehend and in the process people have come up with this theory of atonement, that theory of atonement. There is something deep rooted in our culture that is inherently cerebral, that wants to reason things through, that wants to tie up all the loose ends. There is nothing wrong in that in itself so long as we realise the limitations of intellect. One of the most valuable lessons my lecturer in new Testament taught me, was when our class was trying to tie him down on some particular interpretation of a text, he would take off his glasses and grin and then say 'Sometimes the most honest thing I can say is that I don't know'.

It has been said that one of the most fundamental differences between East and West is our approach to story. The Western mind will ask, 'Is the story true?'. The Eastern mind will ask 'What does the story mean?' We often forget that the Scriptures did not evolve in the context of a Western, rational environment. It is not that we stop using our brains, rather that we begin to use our brains differently as we try to enter into what the New Testament writers are seeking to convey as they reflected on their experience of Jesus, crucified, risen, present in their midst.

The story of the cross and reflection on the cross takes up the vast majority of the New Testament – it lies at the heart of the Eucharist 'Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you'. The promises of Baptism are prefaced with a reminder that to follow Christ is to die to sin and to rise to new life with him.

This is where sacred music, where hymns can play such a powerful role in our personal reflections, in our corporate worship. The words, the music enable us to make that movement from superficial truth to deeper meaning.

The second verse of our hymn begins. 'We do not know, we cannot tell what pains he had to bear

Much of western art has focussed on the physicality of the cross, the wood, the nails, the crown of thorns, the pain. The pain begins in Gethsemene, the agony in the garden – Let this cup pass from me yet not what I want but what you want – the betrayal by the kiss of a friend, the abandonment by the other disciples, the contempt of the religious establishment, the scorn of a fickle, manipulated crowd.

The pain of loneliness, of rejection; and then on the cross the pain of desolation – My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? A pain that goes beyond mere physical pain, one that can be dulled by drugged wine.

It is a pain that goes to the heart of the God head. At the heart of our understanding of God is that perfect communion between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As John tells us of Jesus saying to the disciples in the Upper Room:

‘¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.’ *Jn 14:10.*

That cry of dereliction, 'My God, My God, Why have you abandoned me?' speaks to me of that intimate bond beyond Father and Son stretched to

breaking point. I find myself going back to another hymn, 'How deep the Father's love for us':

How great the pain of searing loss;
the Father turns his face away (Hymn 224)

We may not know, we cannot tell
what pains he had to bear,
but we believe it was for us

There is something extravagantly irrational about love, a giving of oneself. Why do we love one person and not another? There is something vulnerable in love so love can be disappointed. There is a vulnerability in God's love for us that refuses to be disappointed. As Paul wrote to the Church at Rome:

⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. *Rom 5:8*

God is love, so God takes the first step, God takes the initiative. He who made the sun, the moon, the stars and all that is, in love makes himself utterly vulnerable.

I go to another hymn by Graham Kendrick, 'From heav'n you came.

Come see his hands and his feet,
the scars that speak of sacrifice,
hands that flung stars into space
to cruel nails surrendered.

he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross. *Phil 2:7-8*

It is what I would call love at full stretch. I think of a child asking her mother, hands held slightly apart, 'Do you love me this much?' The question is repeated as hands are stretched wider and wider apart. In arms stretched out on the cross God says to everyone, as Sonia emphasised last night, everyone. 'I love you this much.' And it is to everyone that we are called to show that love. We love because he first loved us and gave himself for us.

That is something apprehended not with intellect alone but in heart and soul. I think that is what Michael Ramsey was getting at when he spoke of in times of doubt taking himself to the foot of the Cross, to apprehend afresh God's extravagant, all encompassing, unconditional love – even when we feel nothing, even when we feel dry and empty, when we feel unlovable and unloving. The music and the poetry of hymns can speak to us so powerfully at those times when polished, reasoned argument can leave us cold.

We may not know, we cannot tell
what pains he had to bear,
but we believe it was for us
he hung and suffered there

That we might identify with Paul as he prays for the Ephesian Church:

¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. *Eph 3:18*