

We have heard it said, probably said it ourselves – ‘There is too much violence on television.’ I must admit similar thoughts came to my mind as I read the lessons appointed for use in our services today. There is the obvious violence of the Old Testament passage with the contest between David and Goliath, the threats that each exchange as to what they are going to do with each other’s bodies and the grizzly end of Goliath. But as you read the Epistle we hear of the violence that has been part and parcel of Paul’s own experience as he has proclaimed the Gospel in often hostile environments. Then in the Gospel, there is the violence of the storm, as the boat in which Jesus and the disciples are crossing the sea of Galilee are left exposed to the raw power of the wind and wave.

In the face of violence, be it human or natural, we can feel threatened, despair, powerless in the face of seemingly insuperable forces. And so in our Old Testament passage, the army of the people of Israel is paralysed by fear in the face of the seemingly invulnerable power of Goliath. In the Gospel reading, in the face of the violence of the storm, the disciples, seasoned fishermen though many of them are, are paralysed by fear, confused by Jesus’ seeming indifference to the situation as he lay sleeping in the stern of the boat.

It is this sense of powerlessness in the face of problems, of anxieties that we may experience in our own lives, that I want to reflect upon today. I want to use, as a framework for our reflections, a prayer for peace of mind that was included in the order of the Ministry to the Sick in the 1926 edition of the Book of Common Prayer.

‘O Heavenly Father, who in thy love and wisdom knowest the anxieties and fears of thy children; whose Son Jesus Christ said to his disciples, It is I, be not afraid, and to the tempest, Peace, be still; Grant that this thy servant may be strengthened to cast all his care upon thee, for thou carest for him. Give him quietness, give him unshaken trust; and may the day spring from on high guide feet into the way of peace; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*’  
(*Ministry to the Sick, BCP 1926*)

Setting it in the context of the words of Jesus as he prayed for his disciples in the Upper Room on the night before he died; words from the High Priestly Prayer as found in John 17.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. *John 17.15*

Life in this broken and hurting world involves pain, involves fear. Christian faith, Christian discipleship does not insulate us from the realities of life. There is no promise that we will be lifted clear of them. There is the promise that we are not left to face them alone. God is not indifferent to our hurt, our pain, our confusion. And so we pray:

O Heavenly Father, who in thy love and wisdom knowest the anxieties and fears of thy children ....

Of course there are different levels of knowledge, enabling different levels of understanding.

When it comes to understanding the problems and pain of another; to really understand, to really enter into their problems, we need to have stood in their shoes. We can seek to understand, we can sympathise with someone over the loss of a spouse or child; but only the one who has followed the coffin of a child or spouse into Church can fully enter into their pain, can fully understand.

That for me is one of the riches of our incarnational understanding of God. At the heart of that is the conviction, that in the person of Jesus, God has experienced the whole gamut of human emotion, the reality of suffering, of loneliness and rejection, of death itself.

O Heavenly Father, who in thy love and wisdom knowest the anxieties and fears of thy children; whose Son Jesus Christ said to his disciples, It is I, be not afraid, and to the tempest, Peace, be still

And so, in the midst of my troubles, my crises, my darkness, I can know that I am ultimately not alone. God comes to me, draws alongside me as he did in Jesus to frightened, broken men and women, traumatised by Calvary. 'It is I, be not afraid.' I am

here; I understand your fears and your pain. I have been there, I know how you feel. Speaks words of peace, into my own personal storms, when I am afraid of being overwhelmed by my problems, by my worries – ‘Peace, be still.’

I spoke of the riches of our incarnational understanding of god. There is also an incarnational aspect to our understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ – the Church as that community called to mediate something of the presence of Christ; to be the ones through whom and in whom Christ may be present and active in the world of today; to be the hands, the feet, the lips of Christ in the world, to the world. We who have experienced something of the peace and presence of Christ, called to be ones who in turn minister the peace and presence of Christ.. We are each called to a ministry of encouragement of one another. And so in the prayer we have been thinking about, we continue:

Grant that this thy servant may be strengthened to cast all his care upon thee, for thou carest for him. Give him quietness, give him unshaken trust; and may the day spring from on high guide feet into the way of peace; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

I often think that as we pray for the sick and those in any sort of distress, we are called to be part of the answer to our own prayers. We are to be the ones through whom the love and peace of Christ for which we pray is experienced in the lives of others. Experiencing something of that in our own love and support, they might be strengthened, they might be encouraged to find in themselves the strength and care that God himself seeks to impart, that in the quietness of their hearts, they may find their own trust, their own peace in Christ.