

If the Lord himself had not been on our side, *Ps 124.1*

There is a story of a student challenging a College Chaplain, ‘Religion is a crutch’. To which the Chaplain replied, ‘You’re right. But which of us is not limping.’ like that story because for me it represents a very simple statement of our vulnerability as human beings. We are not all powerful, we do not have all the answers.

Our first and second lessons this morning have a common theme of vulnerability. Our Lesson from Esther, set in the context of the Persian Empire, speaks of the vulnerability of a whole community, as forces within the empire have their eyes set on the destruction of the Jewish community. Our Lesson from James, speaking of the reality of human sickness, of human sinfulness and calls his readers to prayer. Vulnerability, brokenness is part and parcel of who we are, what we are before God.

I just want to stay with that idea of brokenness for a moment. There is the story of a Japanese general that I heard on a recording of the BBC Radio 4 series ‘Something Understood’ that was dealing with the topic of ‘Fragility’. This general had a favourite tea bowl which was broken in an accident. He sent it off for repair and when it came back he was not impressed with the job that had been done. He sent it off to a different craftsman who, instead of clumsily trying to conceal the cracks employed a mixture of silver and lacquer to form a glue to hold the pieces together. This is reputed to be the origin of the Japanese art of kintsugi

Rather than throw away a piece of pottery that has shattered, it's possible to give a new lease of life to pottery that becomes even more refined thanks to its "scars". If you think about it, every repaired piece is unique, because of the randomness with which ceramics shatters and the irregular patterns formed that are enhanced with the use of metals. There is a recognition of the beauty of fragility. The technique of kintsugi, rather than seeking to conceal damage, recognises brokenness as part of the history of the object.

When the Gospel writers tell us of the appearance of the risen Christ in their midst, we read 'He showed them his hands and his feet.'. In his risen glory, the marks of his suffering are not hidden, they are retained, emblems of his brokenness, of his vulnerability.

In the study at home, I have a number of books by Henri Nouwen an academic theologian who spent the last part of his life with Jean Vanier in the L'Arche Community, a collection of communities in which the apparently mentally challenged live alongside as equals with the apparently 'normal'. One book I turn to from time to time is 'The Wounded Healer'. Beginning with the self-giving, self-forgetting love of Christ, Nouwen reflects on the reality of our own human fragility, the fundamental woundedness in human nature. Rather than seeking to hide it or evade it, he sees it as the starting point of our Christian service. We must recognise our own fragility, our own sinfulness, our own need of that healing touch of the wounded hand of Christ.

Turning to our Gospel reading this morning. It begins with the disciples of the defensive.:

‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ *Mark 9:38*

He is not one of us, he is different. One of those in the group is Peter. The same Peter, who after the resurrection, is to go to Caesarea and to recognise the reality of Christ reaching out to the Gentiles and the beginning of the spread of the Gospel out into the Gentile world. What comes between these two events for the disciples is the Cross and Resurrection. For Peter there is the experience of failure in his three fold denial of Jesus in the court yard of the High Priest and healing in the three fold question of Jesus, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ with the commission ‘Feed my sheep’. I would suspect that the memory of the breaking and the healing was something that stayed with Peter for the rest of his life.

That is where the story behind the Japanese art of kintsugi and Henri Nouwen’s picture of the wounded healer spoke to me as I reflected on our readings today. The story of my fragility, my brokenness and my healing are part and parcel of my story, of my journey with Christ and into Christ.

I go back to the opening verse of our Psalm,

If the Lord himself had not been on our side, *Ps 124.1*

At various stages in her history the people of God have known God’s preserving, guiding hand at their side in times of great trial and difficulty. That was often in times of crisis, in times of great vulnerability. In a very real sense it was in their brokenness that they discovered God’s power.

At various stages in our own personal pilgrimage, in times of sickness, in times of crisis, of sickness and bereavement, God is there – even if at times in the darkness of our distress we don't recognise his presence at the time.

May we, in whatever lies ahead for us this week, know the healing, restoring, forgiving presence of Christ. In our brokenness, may we be agents of his healing reconciling love.