

28 June 2009

'The anguish of not knowing'

Mark 5:21-43

Hostage-taking has become an all-too-common feature of conflict in our time. Many of us will remember the time when Terry Waite, John McCarthy and Brian Keenan were held hostage in Lebanon. Largely due to John McCarthy's girlfriend, Jill Morrell, their plight was constantly brought to the attention of both our Government and the Press. The constant waiting, first for drops of news and ultimately for their release, must have been agonising for their families and friends. As we all know, the hostages were released amid scenes of emotion and jubilation; they were recently reunited for a series of reflections of BBC Radio 4.

But not all hostage crises end so happily. In 2004 the Irish aid worker Margaret Hassan, who had become well-known through her humanitarian work and even taken up Iraqi citizenship, was abducted and killed by unidentified terrorists. Earlier this year the British tourist Edwin Dyer, attending a music festival in Mali, was kidnapped and beheaded by an Al-Qaida group because the British Government was not prepared to release from prison a man known as Osama Bin-Laden's "right-hand man" in Europe". And earlier this month a British engineer was among nine hostages captured and killed by Shia rebels in a mountainous region of northern Yemen while they were having a picnic.

Five other hostages - Peter Moore, a computer expert, and his four bodyguards - were seized in Baghdad by men masquerading as policemen in May 2007. During the time they were being held, little news slipped out. But last weekend two bodies were handed over to the British Government and later identified as two of the guards, Jason Creswell and Jason Swindlehurst. It is not clear yet how they died: there are conflicting reports of illness or that one of them may have committed suicide in captivity, a suggestion which is being strongly rebuffed by his family. But the Prime Minister has said that, whatever actually happened, their captors are responsible for the two men's death.

Can we possibly imagine what the families of the hostages have been through over the last two years? Concrete information has been hard to come by, videos made and shown on TV by the captors only served to increase the tension, and the Foreign Office has been tight-lipped about its negotiations, citing "security issues". There must have been times when the families must have virtually given up hope; and then, when the news of the two bodies came through, the tension must have reached an unbearable height. One might almost say that the relatives of the two Jason are the lucky ones - although we know they're not - because at least they know what has happened and can bring the situation to closure. Everyone else still has to wait and hope.

Of course, most of us will never be in that kind of situation. But all of us know the agony of uncertainty, the difficulty of waiting when there is no certain outcome. Even this morning, some of you are waiting to hear the results of medical tests which will determine the whole course of your future life, or you have family members in hospital whose health is in doubt. Young people are waiting to hear exam results, or the verdict from job or funding applications. It could be that there are folk here who are trying to make contact with long-lost relatives who disappeared years ago; they don't even know if they are alive or dead. Quite apart from that, you might be worried at the implications of swine flu having now reached our town. The strain of all these fears and uncertainties can be overwhelming; it can lead to deep depression or total paralysis. Yet, somehow, most of us still try to cling to the semblance of normality even though our emotions are tearing us apart.

The former poet Laureate John Betjeman used the motif of swinging church bells to express his fear of a forthcoming operation in his poem "Before the Anaesthetic, or a Real Fright":

Swing up! and give me hope of life,

Swing down! and plunge the surgeon's knife.
I, breathing for a moment, see
Death wing himself away from me
And think, as on this bed I lie,
Is it extinction when I die?
I move my limbs and use my sight;
Not yet, thank God, not yet the Night.
Oh better far those echoing hells
Half-threaten'd in the pealing bells
Than that this "I" should cease to be -
Come quickly, Lord, come quick to me ...

And the great Jewish comic poet, David Kossoff, describes being in the dentist's waiting-room far from home:

The lady outside said that
the Dentist will be back soon.
She didn't say from where, Lord. Sinister.
She fitted me in, Lord; emergency; urgent;
without appointment. But sinister ...

After a great deal of thinking and praying about what the dentist will be like, finishing off with a plea that he be nice, Kossoff concludes:

I heard the outer door bang, Lord!
Forgive me my trespasses and I will
try to love my neighbour and lift up
mine eyes unto the hills from whence
cometh my help ...
(In fact as long as help comes I'm not
particular from whence it comes).
I can hear voices, Lord!
... thy rod and thy staff support me ... and
walk with me through the Valley of the
Shadow. Thou art my shepherd ...
What am I saying?
The voices have stopped, Lord ...

And that's just at the dentist!

In our Bible passage this morning we came across two situations where uncertainty and fear threatened to overwhelm people. Jairus comes to beg for Jesus' help knowing that his beloved daughter is so ill that she is likely to die even while he is speaking with Jesus. Equally, the nameless woman who is only characterised by her illness (and how many doctors have done that, saying simply, "I've got a gastric ulcer in bed 3") – she has been suffering for twelve years without a proper diagnosis and little hope of a cure. She, we are told, has done the rounds of every doctor in town, licit and quack, but is no better. In fact, her condition is deteriorating and she may well be wondering what life still holds for her. Here are two desperate and anguished people for whom Jesus is the last hope. They have nowhere else to turn.

Just before I left West Africa a lady came to our church one Sunday. She said, "Please pray for me, I am unable to conceive and my husband is going to divorce me" – a very common scenario in that society. The church elders asked her a few questions and two things became clear. One was that, like the woman in our Bible story, she had looked everywhere for help and spent quite a lot of money doing so. For first she had gone to the witch-doctor, then to the Imam, and finally to the Catholic priest. Our Church was her final hope. And the other thing we realised was that she hadn't a clue about who Jesus was; as she said, "Today is the first time I've heard that name". Of course we prayed for her; we also advised that she and her husband seek medical advice. I left Africa soon after and so I don't know what

happened. But once more it shows the lengths that people will go to if they think they may just get a result – just as parents here raise thousands of pounds to send their child to America if there is the slightest hope of a miracle cure.

Of course, Jesus does heal both people. Jairus' daughter is already dead – or at least comatose – when he reaches the house, but that is no problem. He simply speaks to her, takes her by the hand, and raises her up. The lady with the haemorrhage experiences a cure that seems almost more remarkable: she merely touches Jesus' cloak and is healed. (What she doesn't expect is the inquisition by Jesus which follows). Those healings are amazing, and the lives of many people must have been instantly transformed. And therein lies the problem for us: as Christians we certainly believe in a God who answers prayer. But we don't seem to get that sort of answer to our requests; for us, the darkness and uncertainties seem to go on for ever. Does God really care? Has he truly got the ability to act? Is he actually listening to me? Is he even there in the first place? If you are asking these questions, let me assure you that you are by no means alone in doing so.

And, I have to say, these questions do not have easy answers. I don't think that we can expect God necessarily to resolve our situations: a grown-up faith knows that he is not a Fairy Godfather who can lightly touch his magic wand on any situation and make all the nastiness go away. It is true that Jesus did heal many people while he was on earth; but that was surely an extraordinary and temporary situation as much concerned with revealing God's glory to the onlookers as with love to each individual who was made well – not that that was unimportant. But Jesus isn't with us physically this morning and, although I genuinely do believe that sometimes, occasionally, God does instantly heal in answer to prayer, we all know that is not the norm. What is more significant is the knowledge of his presence in our pain, the belief that his ways for us (though inscrutable) are good, and the hope which he gives of an unblemished and painless life in future glory.

But we may not think that those things are enough. The young German theologian Jurgen Moltmann almost lost his faith when he was confronted by the horrors of the extermination camps and the Holocaust in 1945. Not only was any residual sense of national pride and decency knocked on the head, but he was forced to ask some fundamental questions, such where was God in the camps, and how could such sin and suffering be permitted? His celebrated contemporary Dietrich Bonhoeffer had already begun to probe such issues in his writings from prison, but Moltmann took them further. In an attempt to resolve his dilemma and restore faith, he decided to focus on Jesus as the godforsaken one, who identifies absolutely with human misery and apparent abandonment by God. Moltmann's book, "The Crucified God" is one of the great theological classics of the 20th century. And his approach must have worked because, when Moira and I heard him speak about 5 years ago, his Christian faith was still very apparent.

I cannot offer you easy answers to the great quandaries of life. I would if I could; and you might say that I'm not much of a Pastor if I can't deliver the spiritual goods. But I would be untrue to myself if I gave you trite and simplistic answers this morning. More important, I would be being untrue to God as well; and, in any case, you'd soon find out that those quick fixes simply don't work. Like any bogus remedy, they may lift you up for a moment, but you soon realise that they are ultimately worse than useless as you have been tricked by their false promises of hope.

So, then: people come to God in their uncertainty, distress and fear. Does he necessarily "make everything all right" (as I used to pray as a child)? I have to reply, despite the evidence of our two Bible stories this morning, "Only sometimes". Or does he give us a peep into the future and offer us a clue to how our situation will be finally resolved? Again, my answer must be, "Very rarely" – and, in fact, that may be a good thing. But does God, in Jesus, by his Spirit, say, "I understand absolutely, I will suffer alongside you, we will go through these dark times and look for hope together"? The answer to all those questions must be, "Yes, yes, yes!" For Jesus invites us to place our hand in his and go through life trusting in the one who holds the future.