

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 18th March 2018

Jeremiah 31: 31 - 34; Hebrews 5: 5 - 10; John 12: 20 - 33

In the 1990s an anthropologist, professor Julie Peteet from the University of Louisville in America, studied the experience of Palestinian youths, teenage boys, during the *Intifada*. The *Intifada* was the Palestinian uprising that took place against Israeli military occupation of the West Bank in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Professor Peteet discovered something very interesting about the nature of Palestinian society during that time. The uprising, the *Intifada*, was a very basic form of resistance to occupation. For the most part it involved strikes and stone throwing, and in one-way or another nearly all of Palestinian society took part. However, Palestinian boys in their teenage years were particularly involved, and consequently they were subjected to severe, arbitrary, public beatings, and periods of imprisonment by Israeli soldiers.

Growing up as a boy in the late 1980s in Palestine meant that at some point, or at many points, in your young life you were very likely to endure violent physical abuse and imprisonment. Prof Peteet argued that these abuses were premeditated acts on the part of the soldiers in order to, what she called, demasculinise the Palestinian boys. She argued that by subjecting them to humiliation and abuse the soldiers were seeking to undermine the psychological ability of the boys to grow up and play their full part as men in adult Palestinian society.

It is no surprise that Prof Peteet's study discovered that this abuse did indeed cause terrible physical and mental harm that left scars well in to adulthood. However, what was a surprise was her discovery that instead of preventing Palestinian youths from psychologically growing up to become Palestinian men, in fact the abuse came to help and enable that process to happen.

It turned out that experiencing public beatings became a right of passage to adulthood for those male youths. Sometimes they would even go as far as seeking out abuse in order to enable the right of passage to happen. To be physically assaulted by the occupying soldiers became part of the ritual way teenage boys grew up to become men within their society.

What the Palestinian youths had done was they had taken the very thing that was meant to humiliate and break them, and they had used it to, in Jesus' words from our Gospel reading this morning, 'glorify' themselves. By this process they transformed themselves from being individual youths in to a society of men bound together by a common, shared experience.

The creation of a community of shared experience by means of the transformation of an individual through suffering and humiliation is exactly what our reading from the Gospel of John this morning was about. We read Jesus say that,

'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. In truth, in very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls to the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest.'

The discovery of how young men behaved in Palestine 30 years ago helps us to understand how Jesus could describe himself as a solitary grain of wheat that becomes a rich harvest, and it also helps us to understand how he could describe his torture, humiliation and death as glorification.

The Palestinian youths discovered that through their suffering, transformed as right of passage, they could transform themselves from being powerless individuals into a empowered community of shared experience. Jesus knew too that his suffering and death on the cross would, amongst his followers, create a community of people who, because they identified with him, would become a community of shared experience, the Church.

As Jesus said about the voice from heaven in the passage we read,

'This voice spoke for your sake, not mine. Now is the hour of judgement for this world; now shall the Prince of this world be driven out. And I shall draw all people to myself, when I am lifted up from the earth.'

Earlier in Lent I preached about the nature of Jesus' suffering on the cross as being an act of powerlessness: Jesus gave away power in order to create a relationship between him and his followers, people like us, and by so doing between his followers and God. The cross shows that God is a vulnerable, all-suffering God who wants to have a relationship with us based on love, not an all-powerful God who wants to dominate us.

Last week I preached on the nature of the cross as a promise that this relationship of love, which God has for the world, isn't betrayed by Jesus despite the threat and fear of crucifixion. Today, in this passage that we read this morning, we hear again the extent to which the humiliation, the suffering and the death of the cross is transformational. And, we also hear in the reading how obedient Jesus is to following this way of powerlessness, promise fulfilment, and transformation despite the temptation to avoid the suffering and death that the cross brings; this is the last temptation of Christ.

The Gospel of John doesn't include the passion of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as the other Gospels do, but it does have its own acknowledgment that Jesus realised how terrifying was his fate, and how tempting it was to try to avoid it even if he knew it would be glorifying.

He said,

'Now *my soul is in turmoil*, and what am I to say? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.' A voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'

That recognition by Jesus of the simultaneously terrifying, glorifying and transforming nature of this necessary ordeal is echoed too in Julia Peteet's study. Listen to these words she recorded of one Palestinian youth, Sami, when describing his ordeal,

'At first, of course, *I was scared to death* and then once you're in that room and they slap your face and start hitting you - that's it, it goes away and you *start becoming a different person*. All of a sudden you have a power inside of you - a power to resist - you want to resist. You can't help it; you feel very strong, you even want to challenge them; though basically I had nothing to tell them since I had done nothing.'

These words, from a Palestinian Muslim enduring military occupation in Palestine at the end of the 20th century are pretty much as accurate a summary of Jesus' passion as you are likely to hear. In it there is fear, there is resistance, there is bravery, there is transformation, and in Sami's last words there is silence - the silence of Jesus before Pilate - 'I had nothing to tell them since I had done nothing.'

Over the course of Lent we have travelled with Jesus to Jerusalem and there we have seen in the distance the cross of crucifixion and recognised it's significance to us in terms of love overcoming power, promise overcoming fear, and today we see how this cross of humiliation can itself be transformed into something that has the power to transform we individuals who follow Jesus into a community of shared experience.

The burden of suffering that we each carry in this world, or if not suffering then the burden of living that we each carry in this world, seemingly alone, can become something endurable when that burden is transformed by its ubiquitous nature. We all carry our burdens, and by enduring them together, they themselves transforms us in to a community of shared life experience, the Church, ready to love and care for each other.

Next Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, and to mark it we celebrate Palm Sunday and the Passion of Jesus together. We'll read from Mark's Gospel not just about Jesus' the triumphal entry, but the entire story of Jesus' Passion including his crucifixion. Having spent the whole of Lent looking towards the cross, we now need to hear that story which takes us on this final journey from arrival in Jerusalem to the crucifixion so that that we can identify with Jesus and experience fully the transformation that is fulfilled fully the following week on Easter Sunday.