

Fourth Sunday in Lent 2018

'The unexamined life is not worth living' famous words uttered by Socrates the father of Western philosophy at the trial in which he was sentenced to death. CS Lewis writing on this theme wrote: 'Those who do not think about their own sins make up for it by thinking incessantly about the sins of others. It is healthier to think of one's own. A serious attempt to repent and really to know one's own sins is in the long run a lightening and believing process. Of course, there is bound to be at first dismay and often terror and later great pain, yet that is much less in the long run than the anguish of a mass of unrepented and unexamined sins, lurking the background of our minds.' The examination of conscience is one of those Lenten disciplines that we can all discover. Michael Ramsey, one time ABP Canterbury wrote: Take care about confession of your sins. As time passes the habit of being critical about people and things grows more than each of us realize.

According to Plato after Socrates had been told his fate he said: "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget"? These were reportedly his last words. Asclepius was the Greek god of medicine; no doubt Socrates wanted to make sure that his friend Crito gave his offering of a chicken to this god of healing.

'And now I have a name for the demons.' The reaction of Major General John Cantwell in his book 'Exit Wounds' when he was finally diagnosed with Post Traumatic Shock Disorder. It afflicts many in the military as well as those first responders in our Emergency Services. The psychologist treating John Cantwell tells him that his brain is replaying traumatic events so vividly that they are re-experienced not as memories but as something that is happening now, in real time. So the brain becomes locked in a constant state of readiness, hyper alertness - an exhausting, self-destructive state of mind.

Whilst serving in Brisbane the Army Chaplains would assist with the work of a local PTSD Outpatient Clinic. Sufferers would be brought onto the barracks, we would meet them and take them to the mess for a hearty breakfast and then for a tour of the base. We would stop at the Memorial Walk a leafy oasis and reflect a little while we strolled among the plaques, memorials and poppies, we would visit the base museum and other places of interest and finally the weapons training simulation building. What the Psychologists running the programme were endeavouring to do was reintroduce these former service men and women to the environment that had damaged them in the first place. It was called *In Vivo* treatment. Those men and women will always carry with them the memories of their service, but it is the role of the psych teams to make the events they had experienced just that... memories. Events that occurred in the past and which no longer had power over them.

In our Old Testament reading this morning from the book of Numbers we heard the strange account of the Israelites wandering in the desert. They grumble to Moses because there is no food and water and suddenly many die after being bitten by snakes. But what happens next is even stranger. Moses is told to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a staff so that all may see it and be healed.

This strange symbol became known in the ancient world as the rod of Asclepius the universal icon of healing, it is the symbol of the World Health Organisation. It almost seems that Moses is using the idea of 'In Vivo' therapy in the bronze serpent held high those who had suffered were to experience again what had harmed them but this time to be healed. It all sounds rather odd to our 21st century ears, but in John's gospel in the wonderful passage we heard this morning we are given a new vision.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he writes these extraordinary words: *For our sake he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* They are puzzling but in the context of John's gospel we can begin to grasp what Paul meant. John writes that 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of Man be lifted up.' By looking up at Christ crucified there is a sense in which see sin embodied, and in believing it we are healed from its effects. Our faults, regrets, misgivings will always be, to some extent with us, they are the cross we bear. But through the cross of Christ their power over us is removed, they become simply memories and we no longer bear their weight. This is the meaning behind those most famous words, the gospel within the gospel: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

After John Cantwell arrived home from his last deployment to Afghanistan he endeavoured to deal with the weight of his burden. He worked hard to improve his psychological fitness, to face his demons, but it is not a battle that can be fought alone. Cantwell realised his mistake, and wrote 'waves of misery had engulfed me and carried me to the edge of oblivion.' At the end of his book Cantwell describes the many things he has learnt in his battle with PTSD. He concludes 'I've also learnt that love can staunch such wounds and help them heal, and that I am very lucky to be so loved.'

This is exactly the message behind the gospel in the gospel. We all too often believe that we can *work* through our difficulties that make us less than complete. Either that or we try to ignore those nagging issues. But our Christian faith tells us that neither approach is right. We should seek the support and love of those in our community of faith examine our consciences and together we should look with the eyes of faith on Christ crucified see in him the sin of the world and know in our deepest selves that we do not have to carry its burden, its power has been taken away, we are healed. This is the cause of the rejoicing which lies behind our celebration today, the rationale behind this and every celebration of the Eucharist.

During the offertory today we will sing a hymn with these wonderful words: Look, Father, look on his anointed face, and only look on us as found in him; look not on our misusings of thy grace, our prayer so languid, and our faith so dim: for lo, between our sins and their reward we set the Passion of thy Son our Lord.

And look upon it we must, we must indeed glory in the cross of Christ for through it we are saved and made free. Amen.