

Speaking Divine Love Into The World
22nd Sunday, Year A
Matthew 16: 21-27
28 August 2011

The Christchurch film festival concludes today. There have been fewer films on offer this year, but amongst them there are some memorable ones. If you know anything about me at all you will know that I am interested in film in general, and in art house films in particular. So over the years I have acquired a reasonable collection of DVD's of films I think bear watching more than once or twice.

But here I have to confess to a bad habit that has crept in my home film viewing. I have a tendency to fast forward films or to stop them altogether to avoid having to watch bad things happening to characters I care about. I exercise a kind of electronic censorship so as to cut out the sad endings that I know are embedded in the story line.

Take for instance the film "Troy." I always stop the film at the point where Achilles has just got the love interest Briseis, the captured Trojan priestess, back off King Agamemnon, and in his happiness at having won her love, decides to leave the service of the King he despises, withdraw from the Trojan war, and sail back home to introduce his new girl friend to his mother. I am so longing for a happy ever after ending for these two that I cant bear to watch what comes next, when an accidental killing sets off a cycle of revenge killings that will destroy their relationship, and a number of admirable characters.

The trouble with what I am up to here is that art imitates life, and I am trying to pretend that there isn't an inescapably tragic dimension to life in which human beings are often the authors of their own

misery. Try as hard as I might I can't change the fact that tragedy and loss are written in to the warp and woof of our existence, and that the power of sin and death often cancel out my desire for happy endings.

What God proposes to do about this situation came home to me recently in a startling way when I stepped in to a Church in Madrid and just about jumped out of my skin at what appeared to be a decaying corpse under a side altar. When my eyes adjusted to the gloom I realised that I was looking at an incredibly life like, or should I say death like, depiction of Christ's body taken down from the cross, with his sorrowing mother soaring above him, dressed in a black cope. This scene is repeated in church after church in Spain. It has sunk in to the Spanish psyche to the extent that some Spanish women are named Dolores, which means mother or woman of sorrows. If you think that is an albatross around their necks then spare a thought for the women who are named Immaculata.

We have reached that point in Matthew's gospel where Jesus begins to talk insistently about the inevitability and inescapability of his impending cruel death in Jerusalem. The way he reacts so sharply to Peter's horrified request that he drop the whole idea shows that he has had to struggle with the temptation to walk away from his tragic destiny. Indeed there was a film made a few years ago called "The Last Temptation of Christ," which imagined that he went on to a quiet retirement, married, and died in his bed surrounded by children and grandchildren.

But the God man Jesus Christ not only embraces this ministry of cross bearing but goes on to tell his

inner circle that this is their vocation also, and will also be that of those who come after them in the Jesus community. So apparently being a Christian requires not just right belief, and right action, but also right suffering. This is as disagreeable a message for us as it was for Peter, and we need to understand why it is right at the heart of being a Christian.

The wisest thing I have seen written about why God capped off the ministry of Jesus with those tragic events in Jerusalem comes from Gerard O'Hanlon where he writes, "The entire trinity is involved in this event of the cross – the Father wants the reconciliation with us which is effected through Christ's death, and whose fruit is the Holy Spirit in us." And in another place he writes, "The cross is the exposed place in which love appears at its most extreme and as most itself."

There is a twist in the nature of things; a warping in the way reality is assembled in this world. It is the source of human unhappiness, and the problem originated from our side of the line, not from God's. The cross is what has to happen to get this twisting, this warping, out of the human story. The costliness for Jesus of what happens on Golgotha is not because God is in love with the blood and guts aspect of the passion story. It is what happens when real love enters the human story and comes up against the inescapably tragic dimension of human existence.

Donald Luy puts it wonderfully well when he writes of God speaking his language of Divine love in to the world, and as these words, the Word made flesh, enter the human condition they become translated in to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In

other words the distortions that are at the heart of human reality cannot help but turn the life of Jesus of Nazareth in to the further dimension of his death and resurrection. As God speaks the language of the Kingdom, the place of always-happy endings, it comes up against the language of a world of often-sad endings, and then becomes a story of overcoming that works through the fabric of this fallen world to transform it.

Why this implicates us also can be summed up in the pithy saying, “If you fail to truly love then you will only be half alive, but if you love effectively then the chances are that you will end up killed.” What Christ does is to re-define what love is. It is not just being good to those who are good to us, and to the small number of people we have something in common with. It has a wider perspective on who we can share ourselves with. It invites us to live with quiet courage, to address the difficult areas of life with grit and realism, to receive bad news with dignity and calm, and to behave towards others wherever possible with imaginative generosity. And of course it means being prepared to speak Christ’s name with boldness, and to be prepared to receive insult and mocking because we are his.

The kind of determined and brave love that goes with cross bearing is not about the seeking out of masochistic experiences. We look to happy endings for the human story, and hope for this outcome for ourselves. And that is why the tail end verses of today’s gospel reading about judgement are all of a piece with what went before. In the final sorting out of things that amounts to God’s last word on all that humans have been up to, with it’s dispensing of true justice, searching judgement and merciful determinations, the last and greatest happy ending

becomes possible. The scriptwriter brings the narrative to a surprising, satisfying and fulfilling end. No further fast forwarding or freeze framing will be necessary.