

Reflection Notes – 16/4/17

Easter Sunday

The Journey Through Life to Death to Life Again!

On Thursday of this week I visited the Stations of the Cross Art Exhibition at Northmead Creative and Performing Arts High School – a collaboration with Northmead Uniting Church. It is, once again, a wonderful exhibition that takes us on a journey from Jesus being sentenced to die through his death to resurrection and his mystical and wondrous presence with disciples and communities then and now. The art is extraordinary and produced by very gifted artists who have wrestled with the Christian texts to interpret and ponder the meaning of life and death, of mortality and the suffering of the world under evil, injustice, hatred, greed and the pain of life.

The art has left an impression upon me and the tour conducted by Rev Dr Doug Purnell, the co-curator of the exhibition and the drive behind it, helped me wrestle, once again, with this story at the heart of Christian faith and one which serves as a deeper metaphor for all life and death and the struggles we face in the world. The setting is remarkable in that it provides a progressive movement around the auditorium so that we are always in the presence of each part of the story and all the works reveal something else in one another – there is an inter-relatedness to the parts of the story that the works seek to reveal. The movement is around the room but also invites us back across the room to re-experience other parts of the story as we continue to move forward. This is life. We always experience movement back and forth, dying-rising, falling-getting up to fall again. We encounter people on our way who help us and lift us up and we them. There is relationship to the story of our lives as it mingles with the lives of others and shared something of their story, interwoven into a tapestry of life with all the joy and pain.

The Stations of the Cross break the final journey of Jesus into 14 parts, some from the Biblical narrative and other parts from memory, imagination and life. This journey begins with Jesus being sentenced to death and moves through carrying his cross, stumbling, falling and being helped to carry his cross. He meets his mother and the women of Jerusalem reach out to him. Veronica wipes his face with a cloth and their lives mingle and touch each other in this intimate act. Jesus is beaten, nailed to a cross to die and laid in a tomb. It is a story of pathos and poignancy as we contemplate the injustice as the powers of life and world rise up against Jesus who represents God's way of love, justice, inclusion and life for all. The powers are threatened, greedy, fearful, controlling and overwhelm love by nailing him to a cross. These powers are religious and secular, Jerusalem leaders and Rome's servants – Governor, soldiers, guards...

As I walked around the Stations I was struck by the depth of the story because this isn't just about Jesus. In his life and death he encapsulates all of our lives and deaths. His living and dying embrace all of our living and dying. I saw the news of the recent papers – Syria's civil war and the attacks by Assad on his own people; the response of violent raids by the US; the politicising and posturing by Russia and its cold-blooded leader Vladimir Putin. I saw the suffering and death in Somalia as people starve through famine. I saw the violence in our city and the grief of people mourning loss. I heard the cries of those who are hungry and thirsty and felt the yearning of people for life and hope.

The artists drew on their own experiences and engagement with life in all of its joy, wonder and struggle; they wrestled with the existential questions of life and death, mortality and what happens beyond death. The poignantly portrayed the mystery of suffering and death and its finality and all-inclusive nature. They asked the questions that we ask, openly or in the quietness of our own ponderings.

I was left with a sense of the vulnerability of life and people and the commonality of struggle where we are all really in the same boat even though some want to pretend they aren't with the rest of us. The boat becomes a coffin in one piece – perhaps a place of rest at life's end. Maybe it is the place to store the body no longer useful as the spirit leaves and the sack of bones is the earthly remains. Jesus died. Jesus was buried. End of story?

Station 15 is a simple affair, a piece of installation art. It is a door with one handle and it is constructed in such a way as to allow us to see a door that has been slightly opened – it is a door ajar. Is the door opened from outside or inside? If so, by whom? How? What does it mean? The women in the story of Jesus went to prepare his body for proper burial but all they found was an empty tomb. The disciples hiding away in a locked room encounter the risen Lord enter into their space and lives and then disappear from their sight. The friends on the road to Emmaus experience this mysterious fellow who appears near them and shares the story they don't comprehend. Their eyes are opened when they invite him to share a meal and he breaks bread with a blessing – this is Jesus! He disappears but is with them in the mystery and wonder of resurrected life. Paul encounters this same risen Christ as blinding light and a voice from beyond calling him to see anew and follow. The door slowly and slightly opens and perhaps we peer through. What do we see? How do we see? How do we respond to this mystery that perhaps there is more than we comprehend and know? How do we respond to the possibility that what is, isn't really – well not everything and there may be more. The door stands ajar but you and I can only walk through if that is our choice. Only we can choose what we will do with resurrection, with a door ajar, with this hope and life given in love.

As I pondered the mystery of resurrection and Station 16, 'Jesus comes to Warden today', I understood this is the Emmaus Road story where Jesus appears to disciples in their actions of sharing a meal and life together – Christ is in our midst, where we are. The art is breathtakingly beautiful and is delicate fabric sewn carefully together to give a stunning experience when I take the time to look. It is a story of grief, of the death of a husband and how a wife remembers and lives beyond death. There are layers of meaning, of hope and life, of joy mingling with the sadness of grief but enlightening the person so that we don't really know what she thinks or feels or whether the wings of angels lift her up and the light of the risen Christ entering the room fills her being with something more. We see levels and layers to grief and life that are held in a grace that can't be easily described. There is a peacefulness to this work that is deep because it comes in the midst of remembering and it feels good. God is in this but I can't be literal and say exactly how and where God has come to this person because God is always there, an ever-present reality holding each and every one of us in grace and love.

Through the Easter Story I understand that Love is beaten, persecuted, nailed to a cross, killed but never destroyed. The world can do its best to overwhelm Love but God is always and ever more than we can imagine. Love lives eternally because God is Love!