

The Bible & Bereavement – by Vicky Barlow – 23 October 2011

This subject has been very much in my mind during the last eighteen months, since as a family we have been affected by a succession of bereavements, including two which have also been deeply felt at Holy Trinity & St Mary's. I would therefore like to offer a few thoughts from my personal journey, both as a Christian and as a bereavement counsellor for Cruse Bereavement Care over the last twenty years.

The Bible is the source of the name – Cruse – which was given to the organisation founded 50 years ago to support widows and their families. (Now the remit has extended to providing support and counselling to anyone affected by a major bereavement). The founder chose the name from the story of Elijah and the widow (1 Kings ch 17), in which Elijah asks the widow for food and water, since the land was in drought and famine, and the brook from which he had been drinking had dried up. She says she has only a handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse, so she is planning to make a cake for herself and her son "that we may eat it, and die". Elijah says to her "Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel; The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth."

I think this is a lovely story – the cruse which never ran out signifies the generosity of those who obey the many injunctions in the Bible to look after the "widows and fatherless" - a search of the online concordance comes up with 103 references to "widow", most of them in the Old Testament. However, the best known is probably James ch1 v27 – "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this; to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world". Cruse is one of the charities supported by Holy Trinity & St Mary's Outward Giving, and on the first Cruse Prayer Sunday which I attended, this was the New Testament reading prescribed for Evensong. The coincidence was not lost on anyone who was there, and convinced me that working with bereaved people was indeed my Christian vocation.

In June and July this year, I was rehearsing for a performance of the Brahms Requiem, while my father was dying. (In fact, the concert itself was a few days after he died). Originally entitled 'A German Requiem', the work sets Biblical texts which Brahms himself chose, but has nothing in common with the traditional Requiem – according to the editor of the English translation, "purists have even disputed its claim to be a Requiem at all, since it offers up no prayer for the dead". One of the texts is also from the epistle of James, ch5 v 7 – "Be patient, therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and the latter rain". This, along with the other texts Brahms selected, reflects his personal experience of grief – the need to wait until the worst feelings of bereavement subside, in the hope that God will eventually bring healing and consolation, is the dominant theme of the work. It brought me inexpressible comfort, and has done to thousands of others, by

acknowledging the pain of bereavement alongside the scriptural promises of the life to come. The work starts with Matthew ch 5 v4; "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" and finishes with Revelation ch14 v13, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth. For they rest from their labours, and their works follow after them". The intervening texts, from both the Old and New Testaments, are perfectly chosen to console mourners, to reflect their feelings, and to strengthen the faith of people in the bewildering Slough of Despond that is the grieving process.

The Bible is also a rich source of moving, poetic descriptions of grief – some of these have also been set to music. One event earlier this year, to celebrate the King James Bible, was a concert in Abbot's Hospital Chapel, where two anthems by mediaeval composers setting words from 2 Samuel, ch18 v33 were performed. King David is grieving for his son Absalom, who has betrayed him and been exiled from the kingdom – however, when he is finally murdered, the king is prostrated with grief. The Bible says;

"And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!'

This is moving enough when read – when set to music by Tomkins or Weelkes it is mind-bending. It is said that there is no hierarchy of grief, but generally it is agreed that the death of a child is the hardest to bear. For this reason, Elijah took pity on the widow and raised her son when he was apparently dead (1 Kings ch17 vv 17-24) knowing that, after the famine had passed, she could not bear to lose him. Jesus also raised the daughter of Jairus, when her parents were obviously mad with grief at the thought that their beloved child might have died (Luke ch 8)

For many years, Christians were denied the "luxury" of grieving – in Victorian times it was thought sinful to mourn, as it would be questioning God's will. However, thank God, we live in more enlightened times, and I have been privileged to hear many excellent funeral sermons which acknowledge the need to grieve. The scripture often quoted is the story of the death of Lazarus (John ch 11) in which Jesus himself openly grieves:

"When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled. And said; Where have ye laid him? They said to him; Lord, come and see.

Jesus wept."