

THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

PREACHER : The Ven Peter Lock, Archdeacon

Sunday, August 16th 2009

Trinity 10

John 6 51-58

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

What do the names of Oliver Dudley, Will Homer, Nick Bevan, Rob Pickering, Jason Williams and Aung Sang Suu Kyi have in common? The last name you no doubt will know as the brave leader of the Burmese people imprisoned for political reasons by the Burmese junta for winning the last elections. She has now been given a further sentence because she received an unasked-for visit by someone who decided to swim the waters surrounding her detention area. She remains determined to witness for her people and if necessary to sacrifice her freedom as a means of seeking theirs.

You probably will not recall that also in the same week almost on the same day Oliver Dudley, Will Homer, Nick Bevan and Rob Pickering gave up their record breaking attempt to row round the coast of the British Isles to rescue the pilot of a plane which had ditched in the Irish Sea. His life was far more important than their record attempt, they said.

You might not know the name of Jason Williams but might recall the detail of a Private from the Mercian Regiment who died a week ago after an explosion east of Gereshk in Helmand province. He died trying to retrieve the body of an Afghan soldier, fulfilling the soldier's oldest code of leaving no fallen comrade behind. ¹ (I heard today sadly of two more soldiers also killed trying to help an injured colleague to safety).

In one way or another all of these stories from around the world in the last week have one thing in common: the willingness of human-beings to sacrifice something of themselves for the sake of saving another. In the case of our soldiers it was the ultimate sacrifice. And in the case of Jason Williams it was not someone from his own regiment but someone from another country.

In seeking to save another person, or in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi her own people, I am not only witnessing to the noblest of human values but also as a Christian I believe I am seeing something of the nature of Christ in those actions. It takes me into the heart of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Or perhaps to turn it around – those actions are part of the very sacrifice of Christ himself.

Why might I say this?

Well over the last few weeks I have been reflecting on what we understand by *The Blood Christ*. It is since receiving from the cup, the chalice, has been withdrawn from the eucharist (the first time in living memory) and indeed for what I think must be the first time in the Church of England's history, that I have been wondering what communicants members of the church have made of it. Much of the discussion that I have heard and been involved with has been about whether it will make much difference to preventing the spread of the swine flu. Little though seems to have been said about what we are missing and how we might better understand the meaning of the sacramental partaking of the chalice. And of course it has been ironic that the withdrawal of the cup has coincided with readings about Jesus as the bread of life and our need to take of the bread and drink of his blood.

¹ (News from BBC report).

I recall reading a wonderful book by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called *Hymns of the Universe*. de Chardin was a scientist, to be precise a palaeontologist, who became a world expert on fossils and became prominent in the 1950s. He was also a Roman Catholic priest. His great tome, *The Phenomenon of Man* was so radical in its questioning or reinterpretation of the theory of Original Sin that he was for quite some time excommunicated by the papal authorities.

In *Hymns of the Universe* he records his experience that once, whilst out searching for fossils in a desert, he rose one morning and planned to celebrate mass, holy communion. But he discovered that there was no bread and wine for him to use for this sacramental act. So he contemplates the world that God has made and begins to shape an altar from the horizon as the holy table. On this he sets the lives, loves and labours of all the people of the world that day. The bread and the wine are the outpourings of all they are to do that day. The blood is the real blood of those who will make their sacrifices in love for others that day. And in all this he sees the sacrificial out pouring of the love of Christ reflected in their lives.

I wish I could quote from his actual words but unfortunately I am quoting from memory (which over the years always becomes a bit dusty!) because the book, which made such an impact on me, I enthused to somebody else so much so that I loaned it to them and I don't think it ever came back to me! I can't remember who it was I gave it to but I hope they have made good use of it! No matter. I just hope that I have captured something of the vision of the great man and his understanding of the sacrament of creation and holy communion.

It is that insight that I think I take with me to each eucharist and which I now take even more consciously as I *don't* take the chalice. I *do* think more about those who now take their place alongside Christ and whose sacrifice, I believe, is also a continuation of the sacrifice of Christ. The outpouring of Jesus blood was so that we could have life and have it in all its abundance. His sacrifice was and is so that we might know that at the heart of creation is the love of God who pours himself out for us and calls us to make those acts of sacrifice that others too might know of the abundance of life and the power of love.

There is a lovely mediaeval prayer called in Latin from its opening phrase the *Anima Christi* - The Soul of Christ. It prays this:

**Soul of Christ, sanctify me,
Body of Christ, save me,
Blood of Christ refresh me,
Water from the side of Christ, wash me,
Passion of Christ, strengthen me,
O good Jesus, hear me,
Within your wounds hide me.
Let me never be separated from you,
From the powers of darkness defend me,
In the hour of my death call me,
And bid me come to you,
That with your saints I may praise you
For ever and ever. Amen.**

The phrase *Blood of Christ* in the Latin actually reads *inebriate me*. What a thrilling phrase! What a dangerous phrase! To be intoxicated with the life blood of Christ. Robert Jeffery in his book on the prayer warns of the excess of being self-centred about this. But he also throws down a challenge:

The new wine gives life to all. It is poured out for all and given to all. It is the voice of the oppressed Christians in the Third World who can call us back to the true faith, for they know what it is to tread the wine press alone. They, like Christ, have drunk deep of

*the cup of suffering and he says to us as he said to the first disciples 'Can you drink of the cup that I am to drink? Are we in a position to say: we can?'*²

It is that cup we need to contemplate during these days as we give thanks for those who in their lives whether for a nation, a ditched pilot or a soldier colleague have entered mystically into the very nature of Christ's sacrifice of love.

² Anima Christi by Robert Jeffery DLT (1994) p 32