Pitlochry and Kilmaveonaig 161016

Luke 18: 1-8

It’s the 50th Anniversary of the Aberfan disaster – in which a whole generation of the children of Aberfan were lost in the collapse of a slag heap above the village. Such a terrible event would make anybody ask how such a thing could happen – and how it could happen in a world created by a God whom we believe to be loving and compassionate. I listened to the Service from Aberfan this morning. They were attempting to deal with with the same question. And they quoted familiar lines from a hymn written by a former Bishop of Llandaff – words which express the belief that God shares in human pain – is part of the suffering of the imperfect world in which we live:

‘And when human hearts are breaking/Under sorrow’s iron rod/All the sorrow, all the aching/fills with pain the heart of God

I found the Gospel reading this morning quite difficult. At first reading, it seems to make God out to be like an unjust judge – an unjust judge who will eventually relent in the face of the persistent petitions of the widow who seeks justice. But really it has to be the opposite of that – remember the words of Jesus, ‘"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more – how much more – how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" So looked at that way round, it means that if even an unjust judge will finally relent before the persistence of the justice-seeking widow, how much more will God who is the good judge answer your prayers.

And as I thought about that, I began to reflect on countless times in pastoral relationship with people when I have ended up trying to work out with them what it might mean to be a person of faith.

It used to happen most obviously in the hospital. Terrible things happen in hospitals and, as a hospital chaplain alongside ministry in the parish, I found myself attempting to provide compassionate support to people in all kinds of situations. Those terrible moments arrive unexpectedly – still birth; the child who fell out of a tree and died on a sunny Saturday afternoon; strokes and heart attacks; car accidents. Often I found that the people I was sitting with had a more trusting faith than I did.

What do I mean by that. Well that in situations which were over the edge of anybody’s life experience – where their lives were suddenly being changed utterly and for ever – people could talk about what was happening as being within the will of God. And they could mean it.

It wasn’t always like that. Sometimes people were very angry – understandably angry at what had happened and they wanted to blame somebody – anybody – and sometime they wanted to blame God. Just occasionally as God’s representative I was on the receiving end of that anger.

But more often they were heroic in their ability and willingness to look at a situation apparently without meaning and to say that the only way of understanding it was to say that it must be God’s will.

And that raised all sorts of questions about whether God was just or unjust, loving or cruel. Mostly it wasn’t a time for conducting theological seminars nor for attempting to take away people’s faith which was the only thing they had to cling to in desperate circumstances. So I would quietly say things like – ‘We weep and God weeps with us’ or ‘Life can be very hard and this is not what God wishes for any of us’ And people in their kindness and compassion knew that those pictures were also true of God as they trusted in him.

I still think about those encounters – moments at which faith is really on trial – moments when I was humbled beyond belief by the faith and the resilience of ordinary people living through extraordinary moments in their lives.

I don’t believe that God is unjust. I don’t believe that illness and death, the loss of a child the car accident – I don’t believe that any of them are an expression of God’s will or choice. We live in an imperfect world and we ourselves are imperfect as physical entities and as people. These moments of terrible suffering are an expression of the way God made the world and allows it to be. And the most obvious event which helps us to see that is the suffering, sacrifice and death of God’s Son Jesus Christ.

There are a lot of tears in that kind of ministry. ‘What do you think we should pray for?’ I would ask. And we would find a way of praying which expressed our despair but also our faith in the justice and the compassion of God.

I came away from all of that with an implicit faith in the justice of God – even more in his compassion – and yet more in God’s willingness and determination to help us to live the cycle of death and resurrection – to draw out of what is painful and lost some new hope. It’s what we call redemption.

So – if we go back to the Gospel reading – we stare injustice, suffering and pain in the face. Yet how much more will a just and compassionate God hear the cries of his people and bring healing to their pain.