**Good Friday Homily 2023**

*Although Jesus was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered*

In June 2022, the Kate Bush song *Running up that Hill (Deal with God)* enjoyed number one position in the UK singles chart, 37 years after its initial release. It was spurred on to number one by its discovery in the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, a teen sci-fi set in the 80s, and deeply beloved of Gen Z. In case you didn’t know, Gen Z is the generation after my own, people now in their teens and early 20s.

*Running up that Hill* appears in a scene from that series, in which a teenager is trying to escape the clutches of an evil monster in an underworld. She is recalled to waking life, to the sane, grounded normality of this reality by listening to this track. In several episodes, the song enables her to survive enormous suffering and to assist her friends in need.

It’s a catchy tune, number 60 in *Rolling Stone’s* 500 greatest songs of all time! But it’s the lyrics that really intrigue me. I won’t sing. But the chorus goes:

*If I only could*

*I’d make a deal with God*

*And I’d get him to swap our places . . .*

Kate Bush sings of a mysterious exchange, a deal she is making with God. That deal seems to be grounded in empathy, some desire to “swap places” with a beloved person. She appeals to him to understand the hurt she is suffering, of tearing him asunder but being deeply aware of this fact.

Later on, she invites the other into another kind of swap: *come on darling, let’s exchange the experience . . .*

It’s quite an odd love-song, if that’s what it is. The more I think about it, it comes across as a song about suffering. She seems to be asking God to help her get inside the bodily, lived experience of her lover. She seems to want to suffer with this person, to enter into a deeper trade than we can normally understand – a mutual seeing and feeling of pain that is beyond everyday experience.

I might be wrong about this reading. But it fascinates me that Gen Zers could have discovered such a good song, with such compelling lyrics, at a time when the language of romance, empathy, mutual suffering, compassion – the poetic desire to truly enter into another’s world and see through their eyes – is at a cultural low.

So many relationships now, romantic or not, are transactional, conducted at arms length through email or social media. They do not represent this kind of passionate, whole-hearted involvement, this longing for deep exchange and intimacy, Kate Bush sings about.

And maybe this is part of the appeal, of the song and of the Netflix series. It seems to invite younger people into a world of desire, desire not to possess another or use them, but to feel and see the world *with them*, and even the strange desire to suffer with them, suffer for them, if only you could.

You might have had this experience, of deeply desiring to suffer on someone’s behalf, to make a “swap”, to bargain with God. I see it most often at the bedsides of people in chronic pain or with terminal illness. Spouses, children, friends will look on their beloved with a gaze which is even more than empathy.

It is com-passion, suffering-with. At its most extreme, it leads people to say “I would gladly suffer and die in place of my son, parent, partner.” It is a love in which a true exchange is involved, not just looking *at* someone or being kind *to* them, as so often we all do for people, but desiring to enter into their pain and bear their burden. People often seem to be asking God for the grace to achieve this, even if their prayer isn’t articulated in so many words.

In fact, I think the highest human aspiration, the deepest love we can offer, is this kind of compassion; this suffering-in-solidarity. Not because we want to hurt ourselves or spread pain, but because somehow sharing suffering helps the sufferer to transcend it.

Pain shared becomes meaningful, hopeful, lighter somehow; maybe because it has a purpose, the purpose of exchange – that mystery whereby, when you go through something with someone, you come to know and love them more truly. This experience can’t be mimicked by anything else. It’s something that comes from *true* experience: fighting on the same battlefield, working in the same Covid ward, growing up in the same house.

If compassion is the highest human longing, it surely must be met in God’s love. And if *we*, who are weak and so often self-centred, can truly desire to share another’s pain to help them overcome it, if we want that swap, that deal, that mystery of exchange, so much more does God desire it! Our desire is only a parable, a shadow of the longing that God feels for each of us; the longing to suffer for us that Jesus shows on the cross.

God’s love then, in this sense, is *passionate*, it is full of desire, it has a purpose which is many-layered. On the cross, Jesus as God enters into the very depth of human experience. He swaps God’s glory for our agony, experiencing suffering as one made of flesh and blood: *learning obedience by what he suffered*, as Hebrews tells us. This wasn’t an appearance but a genuine, wholehearted entry into the full range of human sufferings: into war, disease, abuse, death.

But more than this, the suffering of Jesus, the Son of God, in his death has another purpose: that is to *awaken in us the same kind of desire; the same longing to suffer for and with others.* Because the cross of Jesus is filled with life-giving power, not to erase pain but to make it the way to eternal life. So often, the vicarious aspect of Jesus’ suffering is emphasised: he died for our sins, he died to save us from death. These things are true, but they are not the whole story. In truth, he died to give us the power to love others as he loves us.

The Scriptures are clear on this. The message of the New Testament is not that people who follow Jesus will be free from pain, but rather they will have a *unique way of experiencing pain as crucified love.* They will be, as Paul says repeatedly, “in” Christ, his body, bearing one another’s burdens to fulfil the law of Christ.

This theology of exchange, of co-suffering and com-passion has been buried under centuries of well-meaning misunderstanding, but it crops up over the centuries in mystic texts and lives. The great 20th century writer Charles Williams took it so seriously that he set up an order, less than 100 years ago in our own Church of England, called the companions of the Co-inherence. These eccentric Anglicans would intentionally offer to suffer experiences of illness or adversity for or in solidarity with one another, to help each transform their pain and grow deeper in the faith.

Jesus says not *believe in the power of the cross to save you* but *take up your cross and follow me*. Come, says the Lord, enter into the mystery: make the deal, make the exchange, enter the path I have set out for you. Come and feel what I feel for others; what I feel for the wounded, the oppressed, the imprisoned, the hungry, the outcast, the criminal. Come and see through my eyes the love I feel for them. And he says, I will give you the power to love others with *my* love, with divine love.

So that when we look on others in their suffering, we are no longer stuck on the other side, trapped by our individuality, but actually able to share something of their pain. This is displayed many times in the lives of the famous saints; in Francis embracing the leper or Maximillian Kolbe offering to die in another’s place in Auschwitz II. But mostly, this grace from the cross is seen in everyday life, when someone tells you with their words and actions: I understand. I see Christ in you. There the miracle of exchange takes place.

Jesus’ cross does not extinguish our desires but rather transforms them. It takes the natural state of human affairs and upends them. So often, we desire (intentionally or not) that other suffer for us; we crucified Jesus for exactly this end, to restore political order, to make ourselves safe.

But when God’s love is done with us, we no longer want to hurt others actively or passively, but rather we actually end up wanting to suffer with and for them out of love. Only the grace of God could do this! Only God, entering the life of man, could bring men into the life of God, the life which is all compassion, all mercy, all goodness. To God be glory for ever. Amen.