

# Madness Descending

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 13<sup>th</sup> August, 2006

Two months before the last invasion of Iraq, Susanna and I were celebrating Eucharist with a Catholic nun at the end of a self-imposed retreat. The sun glittered like jewels on the vast expanse of ocean off Whale Beach. We were immersed in silence, when quite unsolicited, I had a vision.

I saw some lead based painted toy soldiers on a games board. They were clumped together in combat mode, fixed in their stylised positions, when one of them fell over. Almost immediately a stain of blood appeared, and as I watched it spread as if on a translucent screen to its very edges, all the while taking on the deeper shade of crimson, I was overwhelmed by a sense of grief as my intuition instructed me: hundreds, indeed, thousands of deaths of young men in their prime.

And there welled up within me such a sense of needless loss, and waste and such a sense of compassion for the families who would have to endure all of this. The silent tears that streamed down my face could barely contain such depths of emotion.

Today we all know the meaning of that vision. It is a vision of the horror and the madness of our times.

It is, to use a marine biologist's analogy for a dying reef, like watching a house on fire in slow motion, with the watching world comforting itself in the fact that it's only the dining room table and the curtains being consumed by flames at the moment, the house after all is still intact – a passive reaction that chills me to the bone, as sometimes unscrupulous, sometimes zealous and well-meaning forces occupy the vacuum of inaction, further exacerbating an already seemingly hopeless situation.

What understanding do God's words today bring to this chaos?

First, they remind us that conflict and the needless loss of life has ever been with us. What could be more soul destroying than to see a family and an extended family tearing itself apart: son against father, fellow citizen against fellow citizen, a nation, a theocracy, cut in two?

The grief and suffering caught in David's voice somehow gathers up the sorrow of the ages of parents everywhere who grieve for their dead children:

*"Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son – Absalom – would I had died instead of you, Oh Absalom, my son, my son!"*

It is not impossible to hear in those sobbing undertones, the cries of mothers and fathers and daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, granddaughters and grandsons, of those who grieve in Lebanon, in Israel, in the Palestinian State, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and dare I say it, in West Papua and in our detention centres on Australian soil.

Yet there are those, who faced with the same scenario, somehow remain impassive, gripped by emotions of a different sort.

When Joab's better sense is appealed to, to carry out David's instructions to 'deal gently' with Absalom, they are dismissed with unexpected brutality:

*"I will not waste time like this with you"*

And taking three spears in his hand, we are told that Joab himself thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak.

Such courage to kill a man while he hangs defenceless his head wedged in the fork of an oak.

How to explain such a heart of stone? How to explain an action that goes far beyond what was demanded by the situation?

Thucydides the Greek historian surveying the madness of *his* times, looking into the horror of the deep shadows of the Corcyraean civil war, somehow seems to expose the main springs of the destructive behaviours of every Age:

*"... victims were accused of conspiring to overthrow [the government], but in fact men were often killed on grounds of personal hatred... And as usually happens in such situations, people went to every extreme and beyond it... any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of the real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defence... Revenge was more important than self-preservation... in professing to serve the public interest [leaders of parties] were seeking to win prizes for themselves" III.82*

Could have been written yesterday.

The inability to forgive, the determination, at whatever personal and national cost, to wreak vengeance, has reaped a terrible harvest of hate on every side. And each and every violent action, even if it is in the name of the righteousness, as Joab's was, can only ensure that the violence will never end.

When Prince Hamlet undertakes to avenge his father's murder it seems like a commission sent from God. Of course, Hamlet must ensure that the murderer's guilt is established and that this is not just some hearsay and the heresy of demons or the twisted projection of his fevered mind. The zeal to put things right consumes him, and, more and more, the conviction grows within him that in dispatching Claudius' body and soul to hell, he is somehow, in the larger world, defoliating an overgrown and unweeded garden. The venting of vengeance and anger, however, releases its own terrible momentum, surprising even Hamlet by the collateral damage almost too appalling to contemplate - girlfriend,

the girlfriend's father and brother, his own mother - all innocent, and now all dead. And, on a stage littered with corpses, the discovery, too late, in Laertes' forgiving clasp of the hand, the actual remedy that would have brought the longed for peace and wholeness to the State.

Shakespeare's parable speaks powerfully to us at this time of crisis in the Middle East, when in Qana, Lebanon, so many innocent children attempting to shelter from the indiscriminate storm of bombardment, have been killed – children and families that now might still be alive if a cease fire had been imposed.

Those convinced of the 'rightness' of their mission must surely now realise it is seriously flawed. Euphemisms such as 'difficult incident' or 'asymmetrical warfare' will not do. It is time to grasp the nettle, and the hand of 'mutual forgiveness' - the first step on the long and difficult road of making amends for years of wrongful action on both sides.

The solution to our madness is so obvious, so simple, it fairly shouts at us in our readings today:

*“Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord, if you should mark iniquities Lord, who would stand?... [pause]... But there is forgiveness with you”*

Forgiveness – yes – but justice also as John Dominic Crossan, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, de Paul University, speaking prophetically reminds us:

*“After September 11, 2001, and the war with Iraq, it should be clear to us that two options are set before us: either victory for peace or justice for peace. The first model is provided by the Roman empire, and the second by the Jewish and Christian traditions found in the Torah, prophets, wisdom and historical Jesus... the violence of victory which establishes peace comes at too high a price... The second option holds our only promise of a meaningful future. It is a much more radical*

*idea fraught with many pitfalls and dangers. Among them is the danger that we confuse justice with victory."*

*"Put away all bitterness, wrath, anger and wrangling and slander together with all malice... be kind to one another tender hearted, forgiving one another... God in Christ has forgiven you, therefore be imitators Of God... and live in love as Christ loved you and gave himself up for us [even when we were still his enemies] a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."*

And most important of all St Paul reminds us of the fact that we are members of one another.

The madness that grips the Middle East, the ideologies that blind all sides in the conflict that is wreaking a terrible harvest of suffering among those innocents caught in the cross fire, the madness that marches ever onwards into a mutually assured state of destruction is hardening and closing hearts to the higher truth that brute force and violence in the name of revenge will eventually and inevitably self-destruct. No one wins this kind of war. As each life is lost there is nothing more certain than that our collective humanity is thereby diminished. Not to say something or do something at this time is unconscionable.

As you can see this and many other related issues are close to my heart as one, having been born in Germany, who is especially sensitive to the awful silence of the Lutheran Evangelical Church and the other Protestant and Catholic churches. Only fear can explain why, apart from the lone voices of a Bonhoeffer, the Church closed its heart and its eyes and its ears to the terrible atrocities being perpetrated under its very nose.

As human beings, we are made for compassion, are wired to care and to feel - the very reason, in fact why the death camps and their poisonous gases were chosen - to spare the sensibilities of German officers who could no longer bear to

shoot people in the head and watch them fall into mass graves.

Human beings are made to exercise their conscience, and woe to the democracies and the parliamentary systems who belittle and intimidate those who would act on their conscience.

That is why I ask you to join us today in our march to parliament house this afternoon. We eat and drink of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are one with Him, as today's Gospel reading highlights. A difficult saying, yes, but there is no Other to whom we can go, no Other who suffers with the suffering.

May this paraphrase from the Aramaic of Jesus' words drive us all to positive prayer and action:

*Loose the cords of mistakes binding us,  
as we release the strands we hold  
of others' guilt. Forgive our hidden past, the secret shames,  
as we consistently forgive what others hide.  
Lighten our load of secret debts as  
we relieve others of their need to repay.  
Erase the inner marks our failures make,  
just as we scrub our hearts of others' faults.  
Absorb our frustrated hopes and dreams  
as we embrace those of others with emptiness.  
Untangle the knots within  
so that we can mend our  
hearts' simple ties to others  
Compost our inner, stolen fruit  
as we forgive others the spoils of  
their trespassing.*

Amen