

Sermon on John 12: 1-8

The Ministry of Tenderness

You might be aware that Rowan Williams, the now former Archbishop of Canterbury, was in the vicinity of the World Trade Centre when it was attacked.

Indeed he was so close that the building he was in was inundated with smoke to the point where he and his companions thought they were going to die.

It was clearly a harrowing experience for them all.

Williams is quite often asked about this in interviews and he always responds with a certain guardedness; as if recounting it in any detail is somehow to betray a sacred bond that was forged with his little group in the midst of a terrible moment in their lives.

It's as if even to talk about it in a removed, comfortable and safe setting, at a distance is somehow improper to the depth and magnitude of the experience itself.

He usually doesn't say much about it.

But there is one thing he does often recall in such interviews.

As they were escaping from the smoke-filled building, afraid, yet safe in the knowledge that they were going to live, a construction worker from the area who saw them coming not knowing who they were pulled them aside to pray.

So here was this strange little cohort with the future Archbishop of Canterbury and a number of other clergy being led in prayer by a construction worker during perhaps the most telling time in their lives.

And while I can't say for certain, my hunch is that the reason Williams is happy to recount this where otherwise he is reticent, is that this was a

moment when the tenderness of God broke through unexpectedly into the fearfulness of the world.

At a truly awful time and moment, a moment of such horror and death and destruction here was God revealed in the kindness and faith of strangers.

In the prayers of strangers.

And that's always something which it's right to speak about.

Much of our public conversation today is taken up with themes and issues which have little to do with tenderness; little to do with human compassion offered and shared, and especially little to do with the tenderness of God.

Politicians of all stripes seem to believe that expressing compassionate views publicly will be interpreted as weakness and are therefore not politically expedient.

The times when they do the media is far less likely to report it.

It's therefore a vicious cycle.

Tony Abbott spoke beautifully and respectfully in the parliament on the death of Julia Gillard's father, yet it was Alan Jones' crass thoughtlessness that received by far the lion's share of the media attention.

The author Eva Cox asked the telling question on Q&A the other day when she said that we hear so much about what how we create a growing economy, but why don't we talk more about what makes for a 'good society'?

Good question.

No-one is denying for a minute that the economy is a part of this, but it's certainly not all of it.

The action of the construction worker who prayed with Rowan Williams on September 11, 2001 had nothing to do with the economy.

Yet what he did says something about how human communities and societies, indeed human relationships, are shaped by far more than dry economics.

Would we want to live in a world where prayers with strangers offered in the middle of unthinkable tragedy were little imagined, let alone enacted?

What if the God revealed in Jesus Christ says something profound about how somewhere deep down in the depths of our humanity there is a longing for tenderness and peace?

And that actually our humanity is most truly what it was created to be when we offer and share tenderness with one another?

And what if, as Christians who bear witness to Christ we are called to offer into the world, the ministry of God's tenderness?

Lent and finally Easter itself is the special time of the Christian year when God's tenderness is most powerfully on display.

And when God's call to embrace and embody the ministry of tenderness comes to us all afresh.

As we take a detour from Luke's Gospel this week into John's we're drawn into a scene of immense tenderness as Mary anoints Jesus' feet with sweet smelling perfume the night before he enters the city.

This is a stunning act on a few levels.

It is stunning for its intimacy, its knowing excessiveness, and its timing.

It is stunning for Judas' objection and Jesus' response, and it is stunning for what it is pointing towards.

The story is gathering now to its climax and this part of it is a marker to where it is leading.

‘It was intended’, Jesus says, ‘that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.’

Death is in the air, even as the sweet smelling perfume fills the whole house.

Not long ago Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, again a stunning victory of life and the power of Christ over the power of death, and yet here it is for his own death Jesus is being prepared.

The miracle of Lazarus stands as a prefiguring of Jesus’ own story which is following a very similar course.

It seems to be the case that, as it was that day on September 11, in the midst of impending tragedy, it is an act of gentle tenderness that stands out as a prophetic challenge to the cold realities of hate and fear; and of the alternate way of God.

And this so much so that it prompted Jesus to make a statement which on face value stands in contrast to the trajectory of his entire ministry.

‘You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.’

Yet this is in no way a call to neglect the poor, but rather an affirmation of the place of Mary’s tender thoughtfulness.

In contrast, Judas’ motives are sadly obvious and despite his rhetoric actually have little to do with the poor.

Mary is unabashed.

The perfume is poured, Jesus is anointed, and the house is filled with the fragrance of this beautiful gift.

What place tenderness in your own life and particularly the tenderness of God?

Do you know it, can you share it, and can you receive it?

In this scene in the house of Martha and Mary it is Jesus receiving the gift of Mary's anointing, yet more broadly it is in Christ that we are anointed to love the world and one another, as God has loved us.

As if dying on the cross wasn't enough, a singular act of utter self-giving love, as Luke records, Jesus also prays for his executioners.

'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.'

From the depths of hate and fear, forgiveness and giving.

There are many facets to love, some of which are necessarily hard and confronting.

Jesus gets pretty direct with his disciples at times as we know.

Yet tenderness is that side which is by its very nature soft and comforting.

It is by nature the quiet, rather than the loud voice of relationship.

It is an offering of vulnerability not strength, though strength may be tied up in it.

There are, of course, times when we feel tender; when we feel broken down and fragile for different reasons.

We all know these times, times of hurting and sadness and grief.

Perhaps these are times when the door to God's ministry of tenderness is just that much more open in our lives; when a word, or gesture, or a church praying around us and for us ministers to us far more powerfully than at other times.

It also reminds us that it's okay to cry, and that tears are sometimes the greatest gift of healing we can receive.

My hunch is that for each of us if we look back through our lives there are moments of tenderness received or offered we can remember which continue to make a mark on us.

Some may relate overtly to faith, many may not.

Yet we would be foolish to think that God was not working in some way through all of them.

This may seem a little clichéd, but I know for myself that the moments when my children were born were experiences of a kind of overwhelming tenderness I won't ever forget.

In an instant, the whole world, my life and everything around it had changed.

Tears welled up without warning at the miracle of what had just happened and a whole new era began.

While it's always dangerous to generalise, there does seem to be something of a universal truth in this.

Tenderness is seemingly built into this experience as part of our humanity.

I must admit that we're fans of a couple of shows on television which follow pregnant mothers up to and sometimes beyond the birth of their children.

And it seems that however broken or fractured the family circumstances are, at that pivotal time, people from all backgrounds and cultures are struck with an overwhelming sense of emotion, which can only be explained by the inherent tenderness of the moment unfolding before them.

Often gruff and proud men are brought to tears when they see their son or daughter welcomed into the world and take that Neolithic first breath which will set in train a pattern for the rest of their lives.

While this makes for no guarantees as to how they will live and relate looking forwards, the moment itself seems to carry with it a unique preciousness.

We're reminded in the passage, however, that to engage intentionally in the ministry of tenderness is always a risky path.

Through her actions Mary is criticised by Judas.

There is always the risk that our gesture or offering may be misinterpreted, distorted, even demeaned.

I remember once a close friend of mine singing a song at a church retreat in worship.

For him music is very important and on this particular occasion he felt he had been able to offer something of the heart of his faith to the gathered community in an intimate and precious way.

It was a beautiful song, but I had some problems with some of the lyrics, as if I was the one arbiter of such things.

Clearly my pastoral sensitivity radar was off as almost straight after the service had finished I went bowling up to him to quibble with what I felt was the questionable theology.

He kind of shrugged and said he felt it was okay.

Later on he reflected with me how hard he had found what I had said, not because of the content necessarily, but the context.

He felt I was misjudging what was important; that at a moment of shared tenderness in worship, where he had offered something of himself and his

faith for the community, I had thoughtlessly intruded with what was really a completely unimportant complaint.

I had stomped on his gift.

He was right.

In that moment, at that time, it was there was a greater purpose and meaning, and I had failed to see what it was.

Offering tenderness is risky.

It makes us vulnerable on the one hand, and requires of us wisdom and sensitivity on the other.

But the witness of Christ is that for faith and for the sake of the world, it is at certain times and places a risk worth taking.

Mary risks censure so that Jesus is prepared for his death.

Anointed and marked for the path of his journey ahead.

Jesus risks the darkness of the cross in the self-offering of tenderness to the point of death.

The world stomped on that gift too.

The construction worker in New York risked scorn or rejection, embarrassment or malign to offer something of himself to a group of strangers in a tender and prayerful way.

The good news is that God risks this way for us in Christ and invites us in.

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, come home.

Faith is God's gift forged in the tenderness of love.

And as such we ourselves are anointed by Christ with its sweet fragrance that we become part of this self-offering of God as we minister to and with and for others.

This is indeed a great gift from the great giver.

Amen.