

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 8 MARCH 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov and Associate Professor Bruce Steele

Mark 8: 31-38

"Two Responses to Mark 8: 31-38"

FAITH IS CALLED TO RESPOND TO SUFFERING

Associate Professor Bruce Steele

Read the poem [*Musée des Beaux Arts*](#) by W H Auden

The title of this poem is the name of the Fine Arts Museum in Brussels where paintings by the Flemish artist Peter Breughel are housed. The poet refers to three of Breughel's paintings: A Nativity, a Crucifixion and especially the one on the front of your service sheet. "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus". In Greek mythology, Icarus was the son of Daedalus, the great inventor. To escape from wrongful imprisonment, Daedalus made wings for them both out of feathers and wax. The boy Icarus, over-confident in his flight, flew too near the sun. The wax melted and he plummeted into the sea and drowned.

Now, when you examine the painting, you have to look hard to find the small white legs disappearing into the green sea. It's near the bottom right hand corner. The ploughman, intent on his work, dominates the scene. No one is taking notice of the tragedy. If you know the other two paintings, you will recall that Mary and the Baby are almost insignificant figures in one corner of a large busy landscape. Likewise, the crucifixion takes place on a small hill way at the back of the scene. The canvas is filled with a whole collection of people going about their various activities seemingly ignorant of the "dreadful martyrdom". The title of Breughel's painting we are looking at is significant: "*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*".

Comment on the poem

This is a deceptively simple poem. Its language seems so casual – almost like a newspaper report. Much depends on how you read it. One way is to see it as shocking in its depiction of the seemingly callous disregard by the world of momentous events and especially individual suffering. Another way is to accept it as showing that that's just the way things are in the world.

But the poet feels anguish at the facts he records – that suffering takes place in isolation from a mostly unseeing and uncaring environment. This boy's death, this little tragedy, is just one feature of the landscape. Even "the expensive delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, / Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on." But the poet's anguish embedded in his apparently detached reporting leads us to an important reflection.

A friend of mine who wrote about this poem, said that it "points in the direction of a religious acceptance of suffering." He continued " ... any adequate religious outlook today must base itself on the chaotic world revealed to us through the daily newspaper: this is the 'absurd' world with which religion must come to terms." As we scan the daily paper, perhaps pouring another cup of tea, there is maybe a report of someone's suffering in amongst

masses of news items that seem more important, more pressing. Are we like the people in the painting, missing the point – ignoring the suffering – brushing away the tragedy?

Surely every day, our faith is challenged in this way.

JUST SUFFERING **Rev Vladimir Korotkov**

1. Dr Bruce Steele's presentation leaves us with a challenging question: "Are we like the people in the painting, missing the point – ignoring the suffering – brushing away the tragedy?"

In a place where the core of Christian teaching and practice is revealed, in Mark 8: 31-38, we find a disturbing answer. Peter is like the people in the painting! He misses the point! But he not only ignores and brushes away Jesus' words that he will experience great suffering, and this as an innocent person who is to be tried by the political powers of Jerusalem and Rome! He intentionally turns his back on looming tragedy! Even more, he wants Jesus to ignore and avoid suffering! This happens three times in the next two chapters of Mark.

Commentators explain this as the disciples being without understanding about Jesus' teaching. This rationalistic interpretation avoids what poets like Auden express: that humans are always deeply disturbed by suffering and struggle to deal with it.

2. We could ask why Peter found Jesus' teaching shocking and unacceptable.

Part of the answer is that he believed that Jesus as messiah would restore the nation of Israel, that you would be triumphant, and that he would simply do away with suffering! The other part, the unconscious factors, is that we want to be comfortable and safe and that we become anxious when suffering and tragedy emerges.

3. Jesus deals with these projections and anxieties in an interesting way. The way of praxis! By inviting his followers to engage with suffering and tragedy. This "must" or necessity to engage suffering is not a deterministic or masochistic plan of God. Suffering may become necessary when we see people who suffer and whose truth and justice are denied. But to make such a choice for others requires us to be free from self-preoccupation and being contained within our own anxieties and desires.

The call of Jesus to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow Jesus has suffered from damaging interpretations. Joanna Dewey (*Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Fall, 2004) has written:

"If read out of context and with modern western understandings, the invitation can be understood as a glorification of suffering and an encouragement to become a victim: one is to deny oneself, sacrifice oneself, wipe out any sense of self, and to embrace the cross, that is, suffering in general."

This invitation involves a public and political expression of faith in act and being. Jesus now reveals that his mission means confrontation with the imperial state, especially when we realise the meaning of crucifixion in the ancient world.

4. In the book, *The Constant Gardener*, written by John Le Carre, we have a story which illustrates what it means to face the reality of suffering and tragedy.

Justin Quayle is a likeable British diplomat in Kenya who keeps to his plants and is about her majesty's business. He seeks to hurt no one, to be kind and fair to all, and so lives a naïve and careful life. The result is he ignores what is going on.

His wife Tessa is open eye-ed, concerned for the quality of life of Kenya's poor. She is concerned about what Western drug companies are doing. And concerned that the British and Kenyan governments have no interest in her questions about the way drugs are tested on poor people, which may be dangerous to the health of the poor.

It is only when disaster strikes his family that Justin looks at a larger picture of life. He asks questions, challenges his government, and discovers a culture of secrecy and power, which lives without conscience or scruple. Though shocked, he now follows a life, which expressed in Christian terms, is the way of Jesus: inspired by his wife, he risks his life for the greater good, even if it means the possibility of suffering and death.

5. Now, we are not all called to engage in such heroic acts. We are, however, called to keep examining our beliefs, life and practice so that, as Bruce said, "Surely every day, our faith is challenged in this way."

A way of openness to suffering and an honest view of ourselves when we wish to avoid and deny it. In all this the God of grace and suffering love journeys with us as we seek to live out our faith.