

I have been struggling this week with a matter of conscious – today the 16th Sunday of Trinity falls on September 11 and of course there is a great deal of expectation that we will mention the anniversary of the twin towers. But the question I posed myself, and in fact one I have posed to several others – is why do we mark this anniversary so publicly and with so much media when we fail to remember so many other atrocities which the human race has afflicted on itself. Why do we clearly mark some anniversaries and not others? Why this day and not the genocide in Rawanda or Bosnia? Why do we mark some violent parts of our history and not ones for example of famine? And of course different cultures and communities will remember different things.

One of my colleagues rightly pointed out that one the reasons people talk so much about September 11 is that it was a turning point in history. A point when we started to talk about terror and terrorism, rather than just of fear, violence and war. It in some ways marks a change in our modern era. She is right – it did and it has! But why this, rather than other world changes – or other countries or communities who have been effected by violence?

Sadly humanity constantly does awful things to itself, and a world which we so strongly believe was created for good, peace and hope is abused.

My struggle with anniversaries is not that we have them – but rather is about appearance and reality – the dissidence between what happened, how we remember it – and the reality of the present (if there is a reality). I suspect if we went around this room nearly all of us over a certain age could say where we were when we heard about the Twin Towers. I was in Tamworth running a leadership workshop. And there are other points in history we will also remember where we were or what we were doing – some will be tragic and others more mundane. There are always stories we re-tell.

Then while I was still pondering this on Friday morning I had the opportunity to go to a lecture at the Globe theatre presented by Rowan Williams and Graham Holderness about William Shakespeare and Faith as part of the 400th anniversary celebrations. It was a fascinating morning – and interestingly they spent a lot of time talking about the purpose and importance of the drama within a drama. Shakespeare's plays are full of stories – dramas – other plays within plays – and while of course they were written to entertain – there is level at which the plays invite the audience to play with this notion of appearance and reality – and deal with stories of our shared history.

In all honesty I had never really considered whether Shakespeare had a Catholic or Protestant faith before – or that he even expressed any faith – but in the texts which they unpacked – I was surprised to find the unpacking of tensions about the

theological questions of that time (some of which still exist today) – in relation to how we resolve our sense of guilt and come to a point of penitence and forgiveness.

But what I found most helpful as Rowan spoke about the notion of drama within drama was that Shakespeare invited audience to recognise drama being played out to help us understanding who are. They deal with the ‘human condition’ (which I think is a lovely phrase) – that is how we deal with our anxiety and vulnerability. Good drama holds up a mirror to our condition to challenge us and hopefully help us to change.

He then pushed us further to consider that faith, and good worship, should do the same. Our faith – and what God is teaching us – also challenges the human condition – and theology is a kind of drama in which we all engage.

The challenge is of course that Spectators – even at a drama – are complicit in what they see – it is very difficult to walk away unaffected. So it is too with worship and faith – we do not just watch – or read or even listen – we are complicit in the act – we are part of the undertaking we are called to engage in the story.

So we remember events because they help us to understand. We replay them because they help us process the anxiety or vulnerability that they have caused us to feel – remembering helps us to deal with being human.

The challenge of course is not staying in the drama, but rather processing and allowing us to create a new story.

Interestingly Shakespeare’s later works retold some of his earlier stories with a different outcome. The Tempest for example apparently retells the issues of Hamlet with different outcomes and relationships. When we retell a story, we help create a new story and new way of understanding ourselves.

The prophet Jeremiah today in many ways retells the story of creation – and in doing so almost records a de-creation. The imagery is strong and poetic, and is very difficult. With each successive verse, another aspect of God’s good creation is unmade: the order of the cosmos; the separation between light and darkness, day and night; the stability of the earth; vegetation; animals; human life and livelihood. The proximate cause is divine anger (4:26), but God’s anger has arisen in response to human evil¹ (4:22). In this passage we see the pain of the horror events of our history – stories that cause us pain and stories that lead us to cry out to God – why??

But without brushing it under the carpet and saying ‘all will be well’ – we also need to hear this passage in the context of the whole prophecy of Jeremiah – and indeed in the context of the story of humanity and our relationship with God. At times we do de-create, we do destroy – but this is not the end – and this is not the only possible outcome – there is hope. There is a way of telling the story in a way that does not

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2973

continue to destroy us. We can repent – or in other words we can change the way we respond to bring about a different outcome – a different possible ending to our life.

In many ways this is what Jesus is addressing as he speaks to those who have been excluded from within the community. Luke positions the start of chapter 15, drawing our attention to the fact that the tax collectors and sinners had drawn near. That is, those who were seen as the most unclean – those who in many ways caused or contributed to the pain of others – or those who had no place in society came close to what Jesus has to say – and he tells them a parable about a lost sheep and a lost coin.

The two parables have a similar structure: (a) “one” of ninety-sheep and ten coins is lost; (b) a shepherd goes into the wilderness and a woman searches and sweeps the house until they find what was lost; (c) they then call “friends and neighbours” to “rejoice” with them; (d) both parables conclude with an additional comment about “joy” in heaven over “one sinner who repents” (15:7, 10). The shepherd and the woman in these stories evoke images of a God who not only actively seeks out individuals who are lost – but also rejoices when they are found. Unlike the English word repentance, which implies contrition and remorse, the Greek word *metanoiahas* is to do with a change of mind and purpose -- a shift in how we perceive and respond to life².

One way that we shift how we perceive and respond - is to continue to tell the story – to continue to help ourselves understand how we are complicit – but also how we work for the end of the story – the end of the drama to play out.

At the centre of this of course is our ability to take responsibility for our actions – both individually and corporately and to change the way we act so as to bring about a human condition which is informed and embraced by God’s love – and responds with humility and grace.

The challenge in this of course is to focus not on the loss which takes place in de-creation; or even on the one lost sheep or coin – rather the point of our faith Jesus says in the parable is to focus on joy – the joy of what is found – what is learnt – what is lived!

God wants us to retell the drama of our lives, or the story of our history in such a way that we can see and find this joy. This is not to dismiss that there is pain, or even make light of it. Rather our theology is a faith of hope – the hope of being found. No matter how lost, how much pain, how de-created we might feel – God will find us – and God will find joy in us. It doesn’t change the past, but we can change our future behaviour.

I wonder what *metanoiahas* we called to? What change of mind and purpose do we need to make that will allow us ourselves to respond to God in new and vibrant

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1782

ways – or in ways that we might see life as a gift of joy. How do we participate in the drama of life in a way that changes the future?

Friday morning ended with a quote from the *Tempest* – while it might seem somber – it seems in many ways to sum up this desire to see life's work in hope and joy – that we might find in the fullness of God – if only we have the courage to recognise how complicit we are in our faith.

Prospero:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

The *Tempest* Act 4, scene 1, 148–158