



LET MY HEART BE BROKEN BY THE THINGS THAT BREAK THE HEART OF GOD

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be worthy in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I hope that Christmas has been a time of especial blessing and joy for each of you, your families and loved ones. In our case, we had a special time of poignant and loving beauty as our wider family gathered in my mother's home of sixty-four years to share memories of the past and hopes for the future, all under the shading wings of the Holy Spirit as our thoughts were anchored in the greatest Christmas gift of all – Christ born into our lives.

On Christmas Day, at the 8am service, on the theme that the incarnation of Jesus was and is the greatest Christmas gift of all, I said:

Christmas, may (it) prove to be a gift to your lives, reaching into whatever pain or difficult path you may have encountered.

I went on to say:

We should not lose sight that each Christmas is itself a potential gift to every one of us quite beyond the tinsel and wrapped gifts we are about to give each other. Each new Christmas, through remembrance of why it is so special an occasion, offers us the opportunity to seek some divine touch upon the pain and hurt that may have been in our lives.

I said these words referring to the idea that Jesus' birth amongst us was something of an 'emergency contact point' of God reaching out to a groaning world by giving us His Son. That Christ's birth was not just a miracle but a proof of God's love for his creation by his breaking back into the world in the form of His Son.

So it was that on Christmas Day, we as a family felt warm appreciation of this greatest Christmas gift of all. But it would be on Boxing Day that the fullness of God's intent in gifting us His Son exploded in front of me. Two things happened

three days ago, they were seemingly random and salutary, but I am convinced their significance was much more profound.

The first instance was very close to where we live, up a nearby laneway where I noticed a wheelchair in a door alcove of a building partly sheltered by an ad hoc lean-to. That such should be the home of anyone, let alone someone disabled, was a shattering sight. It was a tangible and contemporary evocation of there being no room at the inn for one of God's loved ones. The scene would become dramatically darker when one of our sons-in-law said, noticing the same sight, that he had thought he had witnessed the person shooting up. I am ashamed to say that I don't actually know how long he had been living there for I only noticed him this past Thursday, Boxing Day.

The second event, this time literally much closer to home, happened on the evening of Boxing Day as my wife and I sat on our verandah. As we sat quietly reflecting on the days of Christmas, we suddenly noticed a man in his forties wander by. Looking dishevelled, he wandered back and forth in front of our place and those of our neighbours. Unaware of our presence, he rambled to himself in distressed tones, occasionally banging the side of a wall with his fist. We could make out almost nothing of what he was said, though my wife thought she had caught the word 'pedo' amongst the indistinct chattering. So, it might have been that we were witnessing a living testament to an abominable abuse that must have taken place decades previously.

As I said, these events might have been random, but they both struck me as incredibly profound. I say 'incredibly' not in the sense of some verbal hyperbole, but from its etymological roots of unbelievability; for a world view would have said my two Boxing Day encounters could have been nothing else but random, the world view could accept no other cause, for in the absence of a divine being what else could it be? But to me, they seemed to be part of God's Christmas gift to me, albeit a very uncomfortable gift, but a gift nevertheless - a cause to remember that in my very own neighbourhood, within sight of my closed front door, quiet tragedies have been playing out.

I have often spoken about the Inasmuch sermon of Jesus, those powerful words recorded by Matthew (25:31-44) as part of what is known as the Olivet discourse where our Lord spoke on the Mount of Olives on the Tuesday before his crucifixion, where he had said two defining things:

Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these ...

And

Inasmuch as you did not do it to the least of these ...

You will recall the sermon well; in his homily Jesus asks each of us where were we when we encountered the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the sick, the naked, the stranger at the gate or the prisoner.

Those words came ricocheting back on me as I reflected on these two encounters. Defensive reactions within me brought up the reminder of the things that I have done and do for people in such circumstances as opportunities arise.

But it was then that another set of words reminded themselves to me – not from the Bible this time, but from Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision. Bob Pierce devoted his life to helping people in need in what we used to call the Third World and now call countries of the South. He had boundless energy as he raised money for worthy projects and oversaw their application to help people and their communities in desperate need. All that he did was impressive and very creditable. ‘Creditable’ a word whose etymological origins are from the Latin ‘worthy to be believed’. The work of Bob Pierce over many decades had indeed been ‘creditable’ – worthy to be believed by the world.

It turned out, however, that despite the worldly accolades of believing in the work he was doing, Bob Pierce was at some unknown point to have an epiphany – a divine encounter designed to remind him that credibility in the world’s eyes might matter very little if something transcendent was missing. It was then that Bob Pierce found himself praying a short, simple but profound prayer which he wrote inside his personal Bible and would throughout his life keep repeating in an endeavour to keep his work for others anchored in a divine purpose, not just be a ‘creditable’ worldly project.

This was his prayer:

Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.

Simple as this prayer is, I have at different times in my life found it coming back to me as a salutary reminder to myself, to be sure of the nature of my compassion. On Boxing Day this week, the prayer came back in the form of two of God’s loved beings, by their appearance they told me that their

circumstances broke God's heart; with the result that I was being asked: did these circumstances break mine?

The key issue here, not just for me but for all of us, is whether we feel compassion dispassionately or with the gut-wrenching feeling that was implicit in the original Biblical word. The word for compassion used in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke was *σπλαγχνίζομαι* (*splagchnizomai*) which means 'to be moved to one's bowels'. According to Charles Spurgeon, this word for the emotion of compassion was manufactured in ancient Greek by the gospel writers for it had not existed in that deep sense before. Previously the concept of compassion had indeed been dispassionate – it took the Son of God to take our understanding of it to a new, deeper level.

That Jesus felt this gut-wrenching compassion we know from such references as this from Matthew:

When Jesus saw the large crowd, he had compassion on them. [Matt 14:12]

Where the word used was *splagchnizomai*. This was the same Jesus of whom the prophet Isaiah foretold when he wrote that he would be:

A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. [Is 53:3]

A person who not only felt for the afflicted but felt deeply with them.

I hope this has been a merry Christmas, full of joy and blessing for each of you and your loved ones. I hope that you have felt this greatest Christmas gift, the gift of Christmas itself in your own circumstances. I also hope that you have also felt this the gift with its power to feel with gut-wrenching compassion that which breaks the heart of God and that your eyes and hearts have been open to those situations which you may have encountered.

May our hearts be broken by that which breaks the heart of God.