University Sermon for the University of Cambridge

Sunday 27 January 2019

**The Strength of Vulnerability**

“Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee”. [Dt. 31:6]

The gestation of this Sermon has been a long one – just three months shorter than that of the animal with the longest gestation period in nature, that of the elephant. I was first approached about it by the Vice-Chancellor’s office in November 2017.

Gestation is a slow process, much of it hidden from most of us. However, because something is hidden does not mean that we cannot grow in our understanding of it and in our relationship to it, during the time of gestation – any mother can presumably endorse that. Those of you whose lives are spent in academic research can presumably also attest to that. It is a long, slow business and it cannot be hurried. I am reminded of the words of one of my favourite sayings, whose provenance I do not know but which has been part of my own internal spiritual landscape since I was first introduced to it over forty years ago – “with patience, perseverance and a bottle of sweet oil, the snail at length reaches Jerusalem”.

One of the blessings of gestation periods is that they give time to ponder on the significance of what is on the way to being born. I needed every bit of that time for this sermon in order to decide to what aspect, what mast, of our shared human experience I wanted to nail my colours on this particular occasion in this particular place.

One of the first indicators was my remembrance that one of my heroes (and I have plenty of them) was a Vicar of this University Church, subsequently the Dean of Westminster and the author of a number of books that have played an important part in my own spiritual journey for many years. Some of you may recall that during what might be called the bridge period between his ministries here at Great St Mary’s in Cambridge and in Westminster Abbey, the Reverend Michael Mayne suffered from ME for a period of over a year. He subsequently wrote an account of that experience, which was the first of his books that I read. It is not a long book, as any of you who have read it will know, but it is a profound meditation on the human quality that is my subject today – that of vulnerability, how we experience it, and, much more importantly, how we learn from it and use it to “widen the tents” [Is 54:2] of our hearts. So, remembering Michael Mayne was my lightbulb moment for this Sermon and from that came the scripture reference that underpins it and the two hymns that I have chosen: “Let all the world in every corner sing”, partly because it was written by another alumnus of this university, George Herbert who, like Mayne, found his vocation in the priesthood and “All my hope on God is founded” because it is a hymn that speaks to us in all the seasons of our lives but in particular to those times when we experience our frailty and our vulnerability, the times when God most urgently calls our hearts “to be his own”.

At some point after Michael Mayne’s death I saw one day a very small notice in the Times, announcing his memorial service in Westminster Abbey and giving an address to which to apply for tickets. My application was in the post that day and I was privileged to be there for that deeply moving occasion, during which the Reverend Nick Sagovsky gave the address. Whilst researching for this Sermon, in other words after I had decided on my theme, I re-read Nick Sagovsky’s address and found in it these words, which were for me an affirmation of my choice. Canon Sagovsky said that:

*In the Preface to A Year Lost and Found, he [Mayne] tells how guest speakers at the Great St Mary's Sunday evening service would sometimes ask for advice about how to give an address in such an awesome place - The Cambridge University Church. He says that the only advice he ever wanted to give is this: 'If it is in your nature to do so, be a little vulnerable. Don't be afraid to talk about yourself, your journey, your pain, your vision.'*

That insight echoes one from another of my heroes, Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche movement, whose numerous communities throughout the world are homes where those with visible disabilities, physical and mental, live alongside those apparently without disabilities, bearing testament to his insight that*, “we human beings are all fundamentally the same. We all have wounded vulnerable hearts. Each one of us needs to feel appreciated and understood; we all need help”.* [Jean Vanier - Being Human].

“We all have wounded, vulnerable hearts”. So, emboldened and encouraged by those words and those examples, I want to speak today about how important I believe (originally I wrote the word think there but actually I don’t think it, I believe it) it is both to acknowledge and to give a welcome to, our vulnerability as a crucial aspect in our growth as truly human beings and in the developing of inner strength and resilience, based on trust in God rather than in ourselves. Let me be clear, I am not speaking about masochism, nor about an unending wallow in the Slough of Self-Pity, but about the realisation that the experience of vulnerability and its acceptance, is as central to the Christian –and the human – vocation as the sunny uplands of spiritual and human delight.

One of the most commonly shared experiences of vulnerability is, of course, failure. Robert Louis Stevenson once opined that “Our business in life is not to succeed, but to continue to fail in good spirits”. Not easy. Earlier I mentioned word heroes and one of the principal ones is a woman, with whom I have a very close connection, but who may not be known to all here. Originally, when invited to deliver this Sermon, I was offered two choices of date and I chose this one. The principal reason for doing so was because, as well as being Holocaust Day, this day falls naturally in the middle of the week known in the circles in which I move as “Mary Ward Week”. The week begins on 23 January, the birthday of a woman called Mary Ward, and ends on 30 January, her death day. There is not time to tell the whole of her story but one significant aspect of it is pertinent this morning. Mary Ward was born in 1585 in Yorkshire and died in 1645 back in Yorkshire, having crisscrossed Europe, mainly on foot, (including the Alps) many times in the interim, throughout the period of the 30 Years War. She made these many journeys in very testing conditions, partly in the interests of establishing new communities of sisters and schools for girls and partly in the interests of gaining Church approval for her burgeoning religious congregation. That religious congregation is mine. It is an unusual one in a number of ways – founded by an Englishwoman over 400 years ago, as the first endeavour to found an apostolic women’s religious congregation, based on the model of the Society of Jesus, founded by St Ignatius of Loyola. Its characteristics were therefore to be that its members were not bounded by religious enclosure, would be free to go and serve where the need was greatest and, most importantly, would be self-governing under a General Superior and not under the governance of the local bishop.

All three of those conditions were more or less unheard of in the Catholic Church at the time and they were certainly unheard of in combination. In those early days in the first half of the seventeenth century, Mary Ward and her companions were known as “galloping girls” and this sobriquet was certainly not intended as a compliment by those who employed it. Among the numerous disparaging comments about the small band of women was the one from a Jesuit who remarked positively upon their fervour in their calling, but immediately followed that up by saying that the fervour would decay and that, and I quote, “when all is done, they are but women”.

In responding to those words when addressing her companions, Mary Ward refuted his implication that fervour would decay simply because they were women since, as she put it: ”*There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great matters…and I hope in God it will be seen that women in time to come will do much*”.

Unsurprisingly, her endeavour, rather like some of the seed in the gospel parable, fell on very thorny soil and appeared to die in its infancy. The Church was not ready for such a development in its history and the congregation was almost immediately suppressed and its foundress imprisoned and only released on condition that she did not make a second attempt. During the earliest period of our history, from about 1609 to 1628, Mary Ward and her early companions were establishing schools for girls all over Europe – in St Omer, Liège, Trier, Cologne, Munich, Vienna, Perugia, Naples, Rome, Bratislava. Having attracted somewhere between two hundred and two hundred fifty followers in those years – English, French, German, Italian - there were no more than a handful left by the time of her death in 1645, and only one school remained, that in Munich, which was under the personal protection of the Elector of Bavaria.

Thus, when Mary Ward died, in 1645 back in Yorkshire, the one, indeed possibly the only, word that might have been associated with her was failure – her schools had been closed, the vast majority of her followers had, for very understandable reasons, melted away, she herself had suffered excruciatingly both physically and spiritually for many years. Yet, somehow, through all that she had experienced, much of which involved a daily living out of frailty and vulnerability, she gained inner strength, a strength that enabled her to find a way to keep that most precarious of balances – loyalty to an institution which had caused her most of that pain and suffering, allied to the continued conviction that her understanding of God’s call to her was a true understanding which she could not and would not be persuaded to abandon and that all that she had undertaken, dismantled as it mostly now was, was *“a good thing and what God willed”.* Like the writer of the book of Deuteronomy, it was her absolute conviction that God was indeed going with her and that He would not fail her or forsake her, that enabled her to continue, despite all the vicissitudes that beset her, to “be strong and of a good courage”. Her vulnerability and her suffering had taught her many things – how to forgive enemies, how to behave with magnanimity and generosity of heart and of spirit in adverse circumstances, how to endure suffering since, as she put it in one of the letters (many of them in lemon juice to avoid detection) she wrote during her imprisonment *“Our Lord and Master is also our Father and gives no more than is ladylike and what is most easy to be borne”*. One of her quietly memorable phrases to her early companions was *“Do your best and God will**help”*– a phrasewhich encapsulates her deep understanding of our human condition and frailty and her even deeper faith in a God whose understanding of us is only exceeded by his love for us and His compassion towards us.

I have long been a believer that in good novels one can unearth many nuggets of wisdom. In Salley Vickers’ novel, “Mr Golightly’s Holiday”, she writes of the eponymous Mr Golightly, that he had come to realise that *“sorrow is an architect as well as a demolition expert and maybe, even now, was laying the foundations of a wider view”* – and, I would add, a greater strength. I think exactly the same goes for any kind of vulnerability, including failure, and I see Mary Ward and her life as a wonderful example of that – that what looks at the time to be, and indeed for her really was, vulnerability, failure and disappointment, can in fact be laying the foundations of a wider view.

Although Mary Ward herself, in her loyalty to the Church, did not make a second attempt to found her congregation, it nonetheless survived the vicissitudes of another almost 400 years and today her sisters number around 2,300 and are to be found in around 40 countries, enabling women in all kinds of situations, including the most vulnerable, to develop and use their God-given gifts, on the basis that “there is no such difference between men and women, that women may not do great matters”.

Albert Schweitzer once wrote that, for all of us, there are times when, as he puts it, our own light *“goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light”.* I have focussed this morning on someone to whom I owe deepest thanks for her inspiration and example, forged in the crucible of suffering and vulnerability, which time after time have rekindled my light.

Others to whom I owe deepest thanks are too numerous to mention. Two you have already heard about but, on this Holocaust Day, I would like to mention also two others: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp SJ, in both of whom strength, moral and spiritual, was forged in the crucible of the vulnerability of those who opposed the Nazi regime. They stand for so many others who, in times of moral crisis, have continued to believe that God will not fail or forsake them, as does the author of the prayer found on a scrap of paper in the concentration camp for women and children at Ravensbrϋck:

*“O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us,*

*remember the fruits that we have bought thanks to this suffering –*

*our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity,*

*the greatness of heart which has come out of all this,*

*and when they come to the judgement,*

*let the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness”.*

I would like to issue each of us with an invitation this morning - to ponder on those people who, through the strength gained from the experience of their own vulnerability, have re-kindled the light for us at times when it has been at least temporarily extinguished. As a society we are frightened of a lot of things and we turn them into taboo subjects – failure is one of those things, pain and suffering are two others, disability another, death – the ultimate experience of vulnerability - another. However, if we consider for a moment those people whom we most admire I would hazard a guess that what we most admire about them is not how successful they are or how much they have achieved, but how they have dealt with the most difficult things which we have to face in life – with pain, with suffering, with failure, with vulnerability. My purpose in this Sermon has been to argue, from the lives of some of those who have helped me to learn to be more vulnerable and less well-defended, and one in particular, that vulnerability can be one of our greatest teachers and if we can stand our ground in the face of it, our lives are and will be so much the richer, not least because one of the many things vulnerability and failure can teach us is to be less judgmental – less judgmental of other people and even less judgmental of ourselves, learning a little better to look at each other and ourselves with the loving gaze with which God looks upon each one of us.

Although I have not hitherto made much overt reference to the piece of Scripture which forms the basis of this homily I hope it is, at least to some extent, clear why I chose it. When the writer of Deuteronomy has Moses saying to Joshua that he must be strong and of a good courage he tells him that he should “fear not, nor be afraid of them”. So who are they, of whom we should not be afraid? We know who they were for Moses and for Joshua but for us? For me it is clear that they are our fears, our frailties and our vulnerabilities. Like the enemies of the Israelites, they do not easily let us out of their grasp, but if we too can be strong and of a good courage, a strength and a courage based paradoxically on our acceptance of our vulnerabilities and our trust in God’s strength to help us overcome them, then we can be sure, that just as with the Israelites, He will not fail us or forsake us. He will give us the strength to continue to face them, as he gave strength to those of whom I have spoken this morning. The one thing they all share, whenever they lived and whatever their circumstances, is the thing that we share with them – that all our hope on God is founded.

To conclude: in his book “Being Human”, Jean Vanier says that we are all called to change our world, as he puts it, “*one heart at a time”.* I would like to end with two sentences that for me encapsulate this common vocation to change the world “one heart at a time”. They are the last two sentences of Middlemarch which, prima facie, are not about vulnerability, except that I think they are. Why do I think that? Because they are about one person, standing for all of us, striving to live a good life, a significant part of which involves befriending our vulnerabilities and turning them, in the words of St. Paul, “unto good” [Rom 8:28]. George Eliot ends that monumental novel about the human condition – with all its vulnerabilities - with these words:

*“The effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffuse, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts; and that things are not so bad with you and me as they might have been, is half-owing to the number who live faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs”.*

Amen.