

SESSION 1

A Crying Voice

JESUS:
the voice
that
makes us
turn

A Crying Voice

To begin with it was just a cry: a new-born baby's cry piercing Bethlehem's night 2000 years ago - a cry which brought shepherds running and drove kings to cross the world.

People often get huffy about babies crying during church services, whereas I rejoice to hear them - for two reasons. The first is that a baby crying reminds me that the congregation before me might actually be alive, whereas otherwise I'm not that sure! But more importantly, a baby crying is a fantastic aide-memoire, reminding us of the very start of the Christian story: the cry that broke history in two. Before that cry it was BC; afterwards it was AD. That cry announced that God himself was in town, that God had set his tent up in our midst, as the first chapter of John's Gospel puts it so poetically in verse 14: *'the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us'*. *Skeenoo*, the Greek word we translate as 'dwell', literally means to set up a tent.

Obviously babies cry for a whole host of reasons: feeling hungry, thirsty, cold, uncomfortable, lonely or in pain. The canny knack of being a parent is right-guessing the cause of the cry, but even then it can be quite a lengthy detection process, worthy of a Morse or Lewis. Former Archbishop of

Canterbury Rowan Williams claimed that a baby cried because of the 'sheer terror of existence'. Not the easiest of causes to soothe!

Should adults cry?

Babies cry; children cry; but what about adolescents and adults? Well, they might be crying inside, but more often than not they try to suppress the cry, all macho, striding around the narrow world like a colossus, rather than admit they are frail human beings. Yet Jesus the adult cried, hit by the fiercest grief when his friend Lazarus died. *'Jesus wept.'* (John 11.36) may be the shortest verse in the Bible but it is one of great significance, because God-in-Christ gives dignity to tears, to weeping, to voicing the cry. Often untold damage can be done to our psyche by bottling up our feelings. That Jesus the baby through to Jesus the adult cried should give us the nerve to voice our own cries, to employ lament to give us ways of looking at our losses and failures, in order to save us from apathy and despair. Even daring to rail against God, in company with the Psalmist: *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* (Psalm 22.1.)

Crying is on the same spectrum of emotions as laughter, and just as we don't think someone's odd if they laugh, why should we think them odd if they burst into tears? In his *Holy*

Sonnets the metaphysical poet John Donne implored God to:

*Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might
Drown my world with my weeping earnestly,
Or wash it, if it must be drowned no more.*

Rather than belittling weeping, the seventeenth-century bishop Jeremy Taylor boldly talked of the Gift of Tears. Rather than being embarrassed by crying, perhaps we should see it as a gift to be cherished - both in ourselves and in others. What do we do when others cry? Do we blank them out? Do we even notice their tears? Often when I am driving and seeing fleetingly the faces of other drivers moving towards me in the opposite carriageway, faces that sometimes look quite troubled, I wonder what they are carrying. By that I don't mean the number of suitcases or Tesco carrier bags in their boot, but rather I wonder what has happened to them; what life has done to them to make them look so very sad. I suppose, however haltingly, I am trying to hear their cry.

The language of tears

I see that as quite a Christian vocation: being attentive to the cries of others, even when those cries are unvoiced. 'What do you want me to do for you?' Jesus repeatedly says to those in need. 'I have heard the cry of my people, Israel,' God says to Moses. God is a god who hears his people's cries - and doesn't just hear them, but replaces their slavery with promised lands, flowing with milk and honey. Just as when people tell

Jesus what is deeply wounding them, and actually voice their cry, Jesus doesn't just sympathise, but heals them and restores them to life in all its fullness. 'Look with favour on your people, and in your mercy hear the cry of our hearts,' are the words used towards the end of one modern liturgy. Identifying the hurting points of a community or an individual, being attentive to the cry of others, is an important and essential start to the process of healing.

Recently I came up with three five-finger exercises, not to do with playing the piano, but rather with playing Christ:

- do not ignore the cry
- be Christ to the cry
- see Christ in the cry

In the famous parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25.31-46), those given the privileged place at Jesus' right hand are those who have not only heard the cry of the hungry, the thirsty, the unclothed, the ill and the imprisoned, but have been as Christ to them: attentive, merciful, tender, seeking their restoration. They are the most surprised when Jesus points out it was he himself they were tending, present in his suffering children.

The other wise man

A lot of stories throughout two millennia have drawn on that parable, including Henry Van Dyke's *The Other Wise Man*, published in 1895. Arctaban is the fourth wise man,