

Study 3 - Broken hearts to bind

Leonardo Da Vinci, Annunciation of Mary, 1472



Say or sing together:

*He comes the broken heart to bind,
the bleeding soul to cure,
and with the treasures of his grace,
to enrich the humble poor.*

Icebreaker:

Is it possible to enjoy the Advent and Christmas season without the associated expense, particularly if you have children or grandchildren and limited resources?

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' (Matthew 11:28)

Broken hearts and bleeding souls

Physically, the heart is a vital organ in the body, but when the Scriptures were being written it was also a term used to describe the inner life and feelings, as when Jesus tells his followers, 'I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.' (John 15:11). And in describing the heart this way, as a centre of our feelings, emotions, compassion, and wisdom, it is perhaps easier to appreciate that sadness, loss, or tragedy might break a heart. We see this as Jesus meets Mary and friends, totally overwhelmed by the loss of her brother Lazarus, and John pictures this moment with two words: 'Jesus wept' (John 11:36).

The Bible references body, spirit, and soul. It is easy to understand the body as a physical thing, but distinguishing between soul and

spirit can be problematical, and theological opinions abound. One of the simplest explanations describes spirit as our life force, the part of us that connects with the divine in word and worship, and the soul as that which makes us unique, our accumulated experiences of life (both physical and spiritual) that make us who we are, our uniqueness. However, Bible translations are not clear-cut, with soul and spirit often intertwined.

*And Jesus' mother Mary said:
'My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me
blessed...'* (Luke 1:46-48)

Questions:

- Q) Is the heart still a good image to use regarding our feelings toward others, despite scientists telling us it's all about pumping blood?
- Q) Can you think of any other ways of describing the 'spirit' and 'soul', that Mary refers to in her poem?

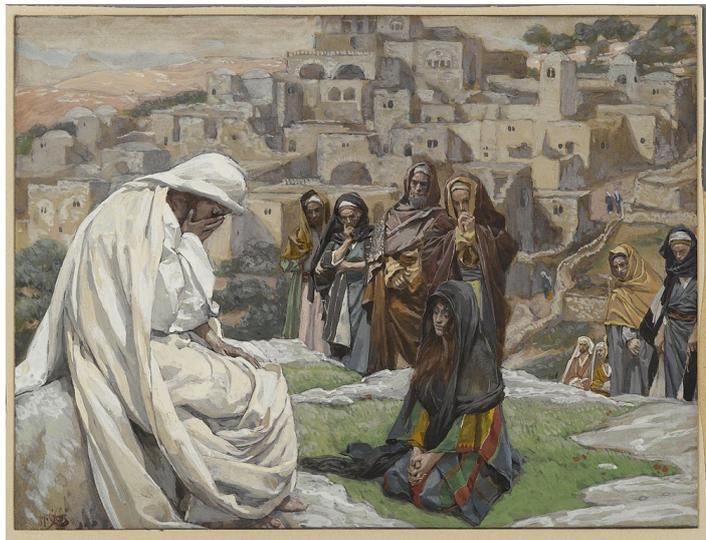
The broken-hearted

(Read Psalm 147:1-3; Isaiah 61:1-3; Psalm 34:17-18)

The world today has its share of warfare, with the loss of loved ones, refugees fleeing, and those captured and taken prisoner. The heartache and trauma suffered can be immense. Whilst the Psalmist was writing, many might have been mourning the destruction of Jerusalem. Others were in exile in foreign lands. Records dating back to c700 B.C. talk of forced deportations of anything between 13-200k captives from Judah.

When any of these people finally made it back home, it was a time for rejoicing for the restoration of their lives, expressed in the words of Psalm 147.

Isaiah tells us about 'the year of the LORD's favour', and there would be many who were suffering at this time – captives and broken-hearted - but we also see in these words the person of Jesus. He was happy to quote from this passage to describe his own ministry (in Luke 4) ending with the words 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. He is the anointed one who will proclaim in



James Tissot, Jesus Wept, c1890

word and deed the good news of God's blessing, fix what sin had broken and bring healing and restoration to broken lives.

There is a threefold blessing in verse 3, where the ashes symbolise a deep sorrow, and the crown, oil, and garment point to preparations for a time of joy and worship.

Psalm 34 reminds us that God is always near to us, hearing our voices when we cry to him in our distress.

Questions:

- Q) Jesus talks about ancient Scripture as being 'fulfilled'. How do you understand the use of that term, and is this something we should look for today as we read our Bibles?
- Q) If Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus, are there ways in which the Church can engage with those who we would call the broken-hearted, based upon the words of Isaiah?

Body, heart, and soul

(Read Psalm 31:5-8; Matthew 11:28-30; James 5:13-16)

Psalm 31 is a plea by the psalmist for deliverance from a trap set by his enemies, but also a recognition that God is his rock and refuge in such times of anguish, and however helpless he might feel, he can trust in the power of God to overcome and in time bring him release.

This is a psalm of lament, which acknowledges that suffering can afflict all people, even the righteous, and although there might not be a 'quick-fix' outcome, ultimately God's love and power will triumph.

Jesus speaks into this theme in with these lovely words from Matthew, where those whose lives are downtrodden, over-burdened and over-tired can find in Jesus the peace that they so desperately seek. For the ordinary Jew, it might be the heavy burden placed on

their shoulders by the Pharisees with endless regulations governing daily life.

There are echoes in Jesus' words of a prophesy of Jeremiah containing these words of God: 'I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.' (Jeremiah 31:25)

James' words are a reminder that bringing the troubles of body and soul to God in prayer is important, something the psalmist knew well. He also reminds us that when times are good, then that is also a time for prayer and praise, and emphasises the importance of sharing in our prayer life, within the safety of our fellowship groups.

Questions:

Q) How important is regular prayer and worship to your wellbeing, and how is that affected by changes in circumstance, stress, and weariness?

Q) Jesus asks that we shed the burdens that we carry and take up instead his yoke, which 'is easy' and the 'burden is light'. How do you understand those words in relation to your faith?

Quotes:

'Christmas is the perfect time to celebrate the love of God and family and to create memories that will last forever. Jesus is God's perfect, indescribable gift. The amazing thing is that not only are we able to receive this gift, but we are able to share it with others on Christmas and every other day of the year.' (Joel Osteen)

'At Christmas, I am always struck by how the spirit of togetherness lies also at the heart of the Christmas story. A young mother and a dutiful father with their baby were joined by poor shepherds and visitors from afar. They came with their gifts to worship the Christ child.' (Queen Elizabeth II)

An attitude of humility

(Read Philippians 2:1-8; Luke 1:46-53; Acts 20:17-21)

Paul is keen to encourage the Philippian believers, and there's love in his words as he acknowledges the way this church has grown. These are people who have found such encouragement from their newly found faith, and within their shared experiences discovered the spiritual gifts needed to build up a church. Now he looks to a unity that can advance the gospel, and a willingness to put the interests and needs of others above their own, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, showing within lives an absence of selfishness and an abundance of humility and service.

If we need an example, then Luke points us toward Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her wonderful song. Mary is speaking for herself, but also for her community and people of God throughout history. She praises the 'Mighty One' who has done so much for

her and acknowledges the high standing of the humble and hungry in the eyes of God. Mary herself is a lovely example of a humble, faithful disciple in a culture that did not recognise equality as we might today.

We might think of Paul as a forceful character, never afraid to stand up for what he believed. But in his address to the elders in Ephesus in Acts 20, we find him on the defensive against a mainly Jewish opposition, and he admits to being reduced to tears by some of their criticism and plotting. However, Paul is clear, that in humility he has simply shared the good news of Jesus Christ, be it in public or going from house to house, and to both Jews and Gentiles, his focus being on repentance and faith – the pathway to salvation.

Questions:

- Q) Are there examples of humility and service within your own community that are worthy of praise?
- Q) Looking back at Mary's song in Luke, which words or thoughts really stand out?

Pause for prayer:

Pray for those who, for whatever reason, find this season a difficult one to journey through.