

'Scars' – The Chaplain's Reflection for Sunday 24th May 2020

The American preacher Barbara Taylor Brown says that she sometimes, as an icebreaker, gets people to show their neighbour their scars. Though apparently this can get a little personal. Depending on the sports you played, or how accident-prone you were as a child, you may have one, two or rather more scars on your body. There is a small one on my left knee from a fall when I was six; I can still remember the event and my fear as the blood kept pouring down my leg as my sisters helped me home. A scar is a wound that has healed. It connects us to a past event, but the body has knitted itself back together. Some of our scars are little more than memories of an event. Others point to life-changing happenings. I have friends whose caesarean scars mark the start of their motherhood. Others have scars from life-saving surgery.

I have a scar on my neck that marks the operation I had when I was 25 to remove a cancerous tumour on my thyroid gland. Since that and the follow-up treatment, I have been dependent on synthetic thyroid. My daily pills keep me healthy, but provide that extra stress whenever I go away - did I pack my pills? - and add to my Brexit and lockdown worries – will I get the next prescription? The scar marks a transition. I have lived for longer post op than pre, and as I get older, adding wrinkles to my skin, the scar is barely noticeable. Wearing a dog collar also helps to hide it.

At the time of the operation, it was ugly and raw, stapled together, and I walked around gingerly, fearing that my head might somehow detach from my neck! 7 years after the op, on an antenatal visit to the hospital, the doctor glanced up from my medical notes and looked at my neck. She exclaimed delightedly, 'What a wonderful thyroidectomy scar, please can I invite in the medical students outside to have a look?' So I found my scar being examined by a group of students as an excellent example of surgical skill, all ignoring the bump that had brought me to the hospital.

Others carry scars that are all too visible, perhaps disfiguring them, causing people to react to the scar before the person. Perhaps they are the result of violence done to them. They need to learn to live with these life marks and the histories that made them. The scars on our body are evidence of physical hurt; we may also carry mental and emotional scars - a slight tendency to react in certain ways connecting to past hurts that are now healed, but still mark who we are. Or scars that are more destabilising.

Such scars are different from the wounds that continue to weep because healing has not yet happened. Perhaps where scabs are easily knocked off by others, or where we cannot stop picking at them.

I am reflecting on scars this week because in the Church, this is the Sunday after Ascension, and scars are part of the discussion about the theology of the Risen and Ascended Christ. We know from the gospels that the resurrected body of Jesus was a scarred body. The wounds in his hands, feet and side are noted by the disciples in the Resurrection encounters. Thomas insists on seeing them to authenticate who this 'new' Jesus is. The Ascension of Jesus takes this scarred body into heaven, and many of the images of Christ in glory show the scars.

They are healed wounds. The story of the hurts, the reality of the suffering, the horror of what was done to his body continues to be part of the story. The body with all its weakness is not discarded but transformed, redeemed, and glorified. Christianity does not have a dualist anthropology - souls good and bodies bad - though some Christian theologies come close to saying that. The Ascension says that the wholeness of humanity, body and soul, is taken up, and the body is a marked body. As the hymn writer puts it

Crown him the Lord of love
Behold his hands and sides
Those wounds yet visible above
In beauty glorified.

And we are invited to rejoice in the Ascended Jesus and to ask that we may be healed, redeemed, and welcomed with all our wounds and scars, visible and invisible. We trust that through the love of Jesus, our wounds may be healed, leaving scars that distinguish us and do not disfigure us. That we may be loved for who we are, with all the complexities of our stories known by God. For heaven is not full of undamaged people; it is the place of redeemed people who bear the scars of real lives. May we, in our time, find ourselves made welcome.

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