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APPROACHING HOLY WEEK AND EASTER. Book -

Stations of the Cross - suffering, then and now by Denis McBride

If you're looking for an immersive experience for Easter I urge you to read this. Conversely if you want it to be a peaceful, consoling one, don't, Anna Wheeler writes.

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I read it, where most reading takes place in London, in transit, and after every few pages needed to take a breath and look around – not to escape but to acknowledge, as the books does, that, yes, little has changed in terms of how we treat people.

This is a positive reflection on the book however – it does its job and makes you think deeply. This horror was experienced by this man, *for you*.

The book is simply constructed, each chapter being a station – 1 to 14. Each begins with a Vorticist-style, striking and beautiful Christ-centred painting, followed by a piece (or pieces) of scripture, a reflection, a modern day event which McBride writes about (often with a photograph), and a prayer to end the chapter. I shall talk about the book not station by station, but by its overall impact on the reader.

We not only share the road Christ travels with that cross, but somehow it feels as if no time has lapsed between His journey, and ours, because of the examples McBride uses of parallel suffering. Also because of the way he interacts with Jesus: ‘Did you know, dear Lord, that you would bear not only a wooden cross on your shoulders but a world of fatigue and misery and

iniquity on your back?’ (pg.17). How Jesus feels, as well as how He looks, is central in the reflections – McBride asks simple questions but ones which have symbolic bearing for us: ‘Was it the weight of the cross, dear Lord, or the thought of where this road would take you that made you fall?’ (pg.24). Jesus continually collapses under the cross – His present situation. There is nothing in the current time to soothe what is approaching. How many of us get through by thinking of the next moment? The light at the end of the tunnel? Many of us do. But for Christ and many others in the world since, there is nothing to look forward to – the dark tunnel of torture, war and loneliness continues.

The book offers no answers, only questions – it doesn’t really talk of the hope of the resurrection and does leave the reader with a sense of hopelessness – it asks on page 24 why gentleness is so often rudely rewarded. Why indeed...why do horrific things happen to good people. Even on page 99, the Lampedusa Cross, constructed from materials found on a boat wreck which is seen as a reminder of hope – is a reminder also of ‘what was’. Life that is no longer living. At the end of the book McBride says ‘If the resurrection means anything in life it is a refusal to accept that anyone should be left

for dead.’ At the time of writing this review, a catastrophic famine is happening in parts of Africa, mainly as a result of conflict. Many innocent people have died and will continue to. We could easily ask, why wait until it gets to this? It’s a disaster we’ve seen before – but the world chooses who it helps, usually when it knows it will lose financially if it doesn’t help. So, people *will* be left for dead, because we don’t *really* care, do we.

McBride focuses a lot on the diminishment of Jesus’ personhood, physical and mental, and all that came with that: his leadership, his power and his love. By doing this McBride very humanly relates His diminishment to that of the common man and woman: ‘Where before you were always noticed and attended to, dear Lord, now all this seems to have faded as people go about their business...invisibility has crept up on you, like so many people who suffer’ (pg.73). On page 57 – 68, McBride poses questions about what we do *with* suffering – when we see someone we can’t help, what do we think? He uses the term ‘There but for the grace of God go I’ but even that isn’t satisfactory in itself as it only rubs salt into the wound of injustice – I’m alright and how lucky I am – that person’s suffering makes me realise this. Is that the best we can do? Indeed the poem by W.H. Auden is

well chosen on suffering: 'how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along...' (pg.59). So because I'm lucky and therefore not really suffering I just carry on as normal appreciating my life, and remember I'm lucky...never mind what goes on around me.

And it's not just those at grass roots but those who we might consider less vulnerable. How do we judge someone who we saw as a *leader* - in charge, and right, when they are falling apart - we suddenly have to see leadership and vulnerability in one person, as page 56 illustrates, and this is even more challenging 'when that person is you.' The book attempts to go into Jesus' head - what was He thinking as He carried His cross, as He was mocked and shouted at? The reader has to hope that the kindness of strangers, such as Simon of Cyrene introduced on page 40, briefly brings some peace and reassurance to Him: 'This stranger's generosity astonishes you, and you are reminded of a parable you told, the Good Samaritan...How often your fictional stories come around to being too true to life.'

Moreover, how does this *true* story relate to life? Simon of Cyrene is spoken of as the modern day Patron Saint of people who find themselves

intervening in trying to make terrible situations slightly more bearable (pg.43). Perhaps it is also Veronica, who, in her exchange with Jesus shows us very visibly what living in Christ is in the very simple act of treating others as you would want to be treated. She goes to him on route of His cross carrying and McBride in his commentary of what Jesus does, says: 'As she departs, she looks at her muslin cloth to see a perfect image of your face impressed there. You know, more importantly, that it is not the cloth but her that is a true icon of you.' The cloth is the mirror of her action – it is a copy of Jesus on a more profound level.

So perhaps this is the hope of the book – find your inner Simon or Veronica, and make what change you can in what is a pretty dire world.

The prayer on page 108 was found in a concentration camp for women just north of Berlin, by the body of a dead child. It asks that the perpetrators are remembered, as well as those they inflict suffering on – because, *through* the suffering, the women met each other and gained comradeship, loyalty, humility, courage, generosity and greatness of heart 'which has grown out of all this.' It is a challenge to read as could be seen to portray suffering as a gift – an opportunity to bond with fellow sufferers and

gain something that wasn't there before. Due to the extreme evil of those who put the women there – the extreme best of humanity came out of the women: 'And when those people come to judgement, let all the fruits we have borne be their forgiveness.' But if suffering makes us appreciate the goodness we have amongst us and within ourselves, this begs the question of why certain people suffer to such extremes *at the hands of others*, and others do not. The summary of the prayer is that we need to use the goodness that comes out of obscene action, to *become* forgiveness.

Forgiveness *can* bring peace to the victim and *may* change the perpetrator for the better but neither of these outcomes are certainties. The question is what we can do to prevent horrendous things from happening in the first place? And there are things we can do - from the every-day of behaving decently and empathetically, to voting for the leaders who include, rather than exclude. We're responsible for what we do – and who we vote for, who then might influence what we can and can't do. Jesus wasn't able to stop bad things from happening around him but He intervened where He could, and this radiated. It is surprising what the human race is capable of when one person radiates goodness – as with the one intervention

of Veronica – she fulfilled what she always was – a child of God made in the image of Him.

We are left with hope that one day the chain of actions that precipitates evil, does break – Christ gives us that opportunity and there are plenty of chances to take it.

Conclusion

McBride more than succeeds in what he sets out to do in the introduction to illustrate that the ‘way of sorrows was not only an ancient road located in Jerusalem two thousand years ago; it is a crowded highway, populated by millions of people who endure violence and suffering today’ (pg.2).

When reading the book, I was drawn back to Joan Baez’s great song of 1967 ‘There But for Fortune’ but at the same time reminded that the vast majority of suffering is created, not accidental. We’re great at destruction on an individual and on a grand scale – and worse appear to enjoy it. It’s built on a false belief that knocking someone down makes us stronger. What concept of strength are we working with?

McBride on page 65 says ‘You know this road is not peculiar to you but will be crowded throughout history with victims enduring their

own struggle and healing for their own death. We pray that someone might notice them, attend them and grieve for them.'

The book serves as a timely reminder that the Crucifixion continues in 2017 – but it doesn't need to.

Stations of the Cross - then and now, by Dennis McBride, is published by Redemptorist Publications. Order at -

<http://www.rpbooks.co.uk/products/1735/stations-of-the-cross-then-and-now>