

SERMON 13 JUNE 2021 – 2 Corinthians 5.6-17, Mark 4.26-34

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



“Brothers and sisters, we are always confident” says St Paul – and I’m not sure what my reaction is to that. Here we are on Orkney, a year later than we should have been. We did a Covid test on Wednesday, all fine. Even when we drove away from the house Thursday before last, I couldn’t quite believe it was happening. We headed up the M6, and got as far as Falkirk for our first night. Then continuing north, to Inverness for Friday night.

The guidance is that you should not cross to Orkney without doing a test, so that was part of our un-romantic evening in the Premier Inn – and wait half an hour for the result. “We are always confident” says Paul – I sat there worrying, not only about the fact my holiday would be off, but also – would we have to drive straight home, would we have to quarantine for ten days in a Premier Inn? But, everything was fine – we slept well on Friday night.

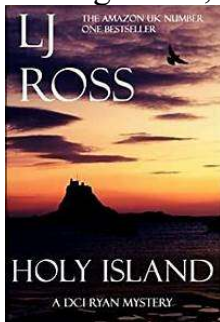


I am not a confident traveller where a ferry is concerned, but Pentland Ferries have a new boat (which has a proper lift, not just a stairlift), the sea was like glass, and our crossing was superb. Ten minutes’ drive to the cottage – it’s only our second visit, and the first was four years ago – but it feels special to be here.

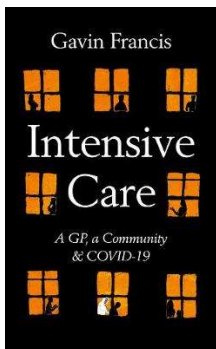
“I hope you’re going somewhere without phone and wifi” said Bishop Libby, when I spoke to her before we left. I smiled sweetly – actually I like phone and wifi, I have more confidence when I can keep in contact with the kids, with those of you who are (very kindly) looking after Selwyn, and I have been

looking forward to sharing some of Orkney with you in this service. Thank God for phone and wifi in this last difficult year.

Holidays are, for me, time to read books. (For Julie, as her whole life is spent reading books, I assume it must be one long holiday!)

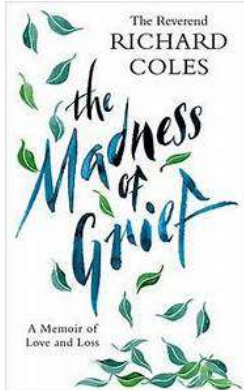


I like a good series of detective novels – this year it’s these books set in Northumberland, written by L.J. Ross. They are a rattling good read, plots twists, real characters, and quite a lot of blood. In this one a gangster and his bodyguard are brutally murdered in my old parish. I can picture the house and the street – I’m not sure I had cure of souls of many gangsters, but there was a lot of wealth in my last parish (even more than in these two) and I don’t suppose all of it was made legally. As I read, I read at a distance – it is just a story – but I did pause and wonder what I would have done if it had been in real life and I had still been Vicar.



The only frustration is that we visit so many bookshops I always end up with more to read than I started with – and in the Orcadian bookshop I purchased this. Gavin Francis, *Intensive care; a GP, a community and Covid19*, Profile Books, 2021. An academic, a GP in Edinburgh (and some time spent locumming on Orkney), it is an overview of January to October last year. Herd immunity, the lack of PPE, discharge into nursing homes – all the failures we know about – and the incredible care that has been given. He has an area of Edinburgh full of the homeless, the people for whom English is not their first language, he writes about the mental consequences of lockdown. I read the book, angry at so much (though well aware that I have the benefit of hindsight), amazed at the work that was done, and a bit guilty that my Covid year was so much easier than his. It has challenged me as to how I will use the energy I have,

how we should use the wealth, power and influence we have, to work for a more just and caring world. Is it enough just to give generously to the foodbank month by month, or should we be more involved in the political arena, pushing to rebuild a fairer, more just, Society.



Then I am also reading Richard Coles, *The Madness of Grief*, *Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2021*, about the death of his partner David just before Christmas 2019. In many ways it is too close to home – I too know the delight of an Intensive Care Unit at Christmas, the struggle of what he calls the “sadmin”, all the paperwork that has to be done after death, and the way grief overwhelms. There is a comfort in shared experience, and a smile at wisdom. One of the comments he makes is when he has been fighting with the hospital parking regime – page 36 “As a general rule, try not to be impatient with people in hospital car parks. They may be having the worst day of their lives.” Good advice.



Even on holiday, eight years after Gareth’s death, grief can hit. He was a good lad, but if he hadn’t been fed, he could turn nasty. Julia’s café in Stromness was a place we went to on several occasions on a previous holiday in order to get a baked potato inside him – to transform his mood and make him nice again. Julia’s café is shut, but they have a takeaway and a marquee – we have bacon rolls for Sunday lunch, joke about the lack of potatoes, wonder if a bacon roll would have been sufficient, and – just for a moment – there’s one of those moments. “Grief is the price we pay for love”, never a truer phrase. My Christian faith comforts me, reassures me – love is stronger than death.



Going back to St Paul – he believes that life is a gift of God, and our role is to please God. That idea may be out of fashion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – but Paul is right. God wants the best from us, and we are his people. One of the Eucharistic Prayers we use has the words “our duty and our joy”. Most of the time we try and work together, doing our best, because we want to, because it pleases us, because we do it for other people – but sometimes we must get our heads down and say “this is what God needs us to do, we will get on and do it”. LJ Ross’s detective books show an incredibly hard-working police force, yet (as far as they are concerned) they are not doing that work for God – indeed God, and his representatives are not portrayed sympathetically in these books. They are doing it out of duty and love – a care for the victim and their families, a care for the society in which we all live and move and have our being. I do believe that God will accept that. Gavin Francis doesn’t care as a GP because he is doing it for God – but I am not going to criticise him, I am in awe of his love and service.



Richard Cole shares the same faith as we do, shares the same church as we do. He shares a little in this book about the pain when he receives letters telling him that he is damned because he is gay, telling him that God has sent the man he loves into the fires of hell, and that God will do the same for him. He writes honestly about the struggle of faith, and the cost of grief – and he writes movingly about the friends (Christian and non-Christian) who journey with him.



Confidence has been in short supply this last year – and when we get back, there may be trouble ahead (to quote the song). Two weddings, three Memorial Services and a Baptism in the diary for the first weekend back – two weeks time. Am I confident they can all go ahead with the numbers, and the singing, that people want? No, I'm not. Am I confident that we're on the way out of all this, no I'm not.



Have I got faith the size of a mustard seed – you know what, yes I have. That I can manage. It may not be much, but in God's providence it is enough. My mustard seed, plus your mustard seeds, plus all the mustard seeds of good from men and women across this world, plus the love and power of God – you know what, that will be enough to transform this world.

Two islands north of where we are now, on the isle of Lamb Holm, stands the Italian Chapel. In the Second World War Italian Prisoners of War were sent to Orkney to work on the Churchill Barriers, four causeways that link the islands and cut off access to Scapa Flow from the East.



You can imagine that for a bunch of Italians, captures in North Africa, being sent to Orkney for hard manual work in winter, was pretty horrible. They were defeated, they were prisoners, they had no news of their families.



The human spirit is strong, they formed a band, they planted a garden, and then they created a church. The camp CO, Major Buckland, saw the need. They had an enthusiastic padre, Father P. Gioacchino Giacobazzi, they had an artist, Domenico Chiocchetti, and they enthused the others. Late in 1943 two Nissan huts became available, and a work of art was created, a holy place, was created.



They hid the corrugated iron with plasterboard, the painter got to work,



they created an altar out of concrete,



the sanctuary lamp out of corned beef tins.



The Madonna and Child was based on a holy picture that Chiocchetti had carried with him through the War.



It stands as a Holy Place, a tribute to the human spirit and the power of faith. In 1992 one of the POWs returned. His name was Bruno Volpi. He wrote "People cannot be judged by their precarious situations. Their culture, spirit and will to express themselves in creative thoughts and deeds are stronger than any

limitation to freedom. This is the spirit that gave birth to the works of art on Lambsholm.”



To quote Mark's Gospel: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." Thanks be to God. Amen.