

Sermon 22nd April 2021

I recall saying at the start of Lent that once a Priest has said what their Lenten discipline is, they may have a problem if they don't stick to it as they might be asked about how it's gone by their congregation! Well, I didn't stick to my discipline, because the simple truth is that the book I'd chosen to read I found rather dull and boring, so I ditched it and chose two different books instead! Those two books were perhaps strange and unlikely reads for the kind of situation I was at in my life – about to be married - but nonetheless the kind of books which I love because they speak deeply to human life with all its ups, downs and unpredictability, so they rather suited me! I thought that today I'd share something about those two books with you – partly because I think they at least loosely connect with our Gospel reading.

My first book was a novel by Sally Vickers, called 'Miss Garnet's Angel', and the second book, by the Rev'd Richard Coles, called 'The Madness of Grief'. I don't think that actually either of these titles does credit too well to the intricacies of each book, but I guess it depends what you're expecting from a book's title and what you're looking for in your reading.

The central character in Sally Vickers' fictitious novel, Miss Julia Garnet, has been bereaved of her closest friend and long standing housemate Harriet, and Miss Garnet finds herself on a somewhat spontaneous and unexpectedly lengthy exploration of Venice. Having never been abroad before, this is quite something for her. The central character in Richard Coles' non-fiction book, David, also his closest companion and life partner, tragically died at the end of 2019.

The two books therefore share a common theme – that of emerging from a major bereavement and what life is like for the people who were closest to them, left in this world without their closest companions. Both books address in their own ways the impact on the characters of their respective companion's deaths.

At the beginning of Sally Vickers' book, Miss Garnet has more or less rejected any faith she may have habitually or academically, perhaps, held when younger. As the novel progresses and as her exploring of Venice develops, she encounters several people who one way or another – may be even inadvertently - lead her to re-engage with the topic of Christianity. Relating to her discoveries of pieces of Venetian stonework and artefacts in some of the churches there, she also reads the Apocryphal book of Tobit and the biblical story cleverly weaves its way through the novel. Miss Garnet doesn't explicitly make any profession of faith, even towards the end of the book, where she begins to contemplate her own death, and as she proscribes her own epitaph.

But it's apparent that in her later years she's deepened her awareness of the depth and breadth of human life, and she has an increased and enriched awareness of human love and relationships of which she was previously rather oblivious, having been so self-effacing and introverted, and she therefore has I think an increased awareness of God in her life.

Richard Coles' book points to all of those same issues of human life – loss, encounter, unpredictability, and much more besides. One theme which I feel comes across particularly strongly is the eternal nature of love – both human and Godly: we see this especially in his description of the choosing of the burial plots for his partner David and for himself, adjacent to each other and having verses from a Psalm beginning on one of their headstones and planned to end on the other, when the time comes. In this and many other ways there's a mirroring of God's eternal love within both their human life in this world and their eternal love for each other; it is only the physical loss of David's human body in this world which separates them – they are together in death as in life and God is ever present – fully present to them - in both places.

And so it is for me that the themes of eternity, death and the possibilities of life *in all its fullness* and possibly even legacy – the kinds of things we leave behind for others to perhaps pick up on when we depart this life - are represented in both books.

If you were going to write a book yourself about life in all its fullness, in this life - and after death - I wonder what you would write, or what you might refer to for that writing? As ever when I think about this kind of sermon, I'm asking myself the same questions! What situations or events from your life would you draw on? Would you look to your closest relationships to help describe your thoughts? Might you explore a piece of fine art to illustrate things, or use a precious piece of stone or a sculpture? Might you draw on some verses of scripture? And has your understanding of life and death, changed over the years? Have these ideas and beliefs changed dramatically and unexpectedly, or gradually morphed and changed and grown into what they are currently?

Are you open to having your mind and heart being changed even more, or are you fully content with your understanding just as it is? As you can see, these two books had quite an impact on me and challenged my own thinking – at least much more so than my initial chosen Lenten discipline!

In Miss Garnet's case, she came late in life to make some spiritual and religious discoveries and when she did so it was particularly through the unexpected ups and downs of relationships – all, in fact, new relationships to her; one could say her rather solitary relationship with her housemate Harriet was a kind of self-imposed limitation, and it took the death of Harriet for Miss Garnet to allow herself to emerge into a more fulfilled kind of life and existence.

In Richard Coles' case, well we don't have time right now to look back on his whole somewhat colourful life to date, and how those myriad of events have influenced him, but from his most recent book it is evident that love for others and relationship are critical for him in order to experience life in all its fullness and a deeper understanding of the impact of loss and death.

Well the one book I've barely mentioned so far this morning is John's Gospel, from where we had our reading. And of course there we find that it is through another person's death – Jesus - and through his resurrection – that we're enabled to experience fullness of life, and we see that death for ourselves is not the end but a new beginning - an anticipation of eternity. John in the short passage we heard quotes two things that Jesus said: first that we are drawn by the Father to Jesus, through hearing and learning scripture, and secondly that it is through the eating of bread – the body of Jesus, that we receive the bread of life.

Both of these things have the capacity to draw us into a fullness of life here in this world, and they beckon us towards a life after death which we can't fully comprehend but we can trust in. If we were to try to explain these concepts which Jesus spoke of to someone who'd not heard about these things before, how exactly would we try to describe them? What would we say? What would we write?

*Sally Vickers **Miss Garnet's Angel** / Richard Coles **The Madness of Grief***