

Our need to be in touch with the crucified of today

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Introduction

The morning after the elections we gathered around the kitchen table for our weekly house meeting. We are the people who live in a former Carmelite monastery, now called Carmel House. We are women from all over the world and some of us have children. Most of us live at Carmel House because of being destitute. We come together on Fridays to share what has been happening for us during the week and discuss what we would like to do during our community day. This particular Friday a volunteer shared her concern about the result of the elections of parliament. Most of us hadn't heard the outcome yet. There was shock. Most of the women were bowing their heads, hands covering their faces and sighing: 'O my God... Not Cameron'. You could hear the despair. They all knew very well that their chances of getting leave to remain had been reduced. Then suddenly one of the women shot up and said loud and clearly: 'Cameron is not God'. We all laughed and the tension was broken.

For me this is an example of how being with people who are marginalised (or 'crucified' today) is not only about sharing their suffering but also becoming aware that crucifixion is not the end, and that in the 'suffering and dying' there are already signs of new life and resurrection. Having lived with refugees in different parts of the world and shared with them their hardships, I have been inspired and nourished by their zest for life, their resilience and their faith. They have shown me what life is really about. I need them as much as (or maybe even more than) they need me. Acknowledging that, means we are equals and there is no distinction between the 'helper' and the 'helped'. We are part of one body and in need of each other.

Today I would like to explore with you what "the crucified" means to us and what motivates us to be with people suffering today. I would like to unpack with you the words of the title of this talk. What do we mean by crucified? Who are the crucified of today? What is our need? And what do we mean by being in touch with the crucified? When I shared this with my 18 year old niece she said: I am tired already. I hope you are not!

I don't have the answers (although maybe I can give that impression). I am not even aiming at trying to get a clear answer. I hope however, by exploring together we can help each other to look honestly at how we live our Christian life and inspire one another. I am not a theologian. I am not a vowed Passionist. My sharing is based on my life experience, sharing my life with refugees in different parts of the world and my years of searching how to put my Christian faith in practise, how to follow Christ. I would also like to introduce you to Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who died at the age of 29 in Auswitzch in 1943. She wrote a diary during the last two years of her life. In a world falling apart and losing everything she had, she developed a profound connectedness with herself, with God within her, with the suffering Jews, with the persecuting Germans and with nature.

I rediscovered her recently during a retreat about her life, here at Minsteracres, led by an Angelican minister, Patrick Woodhouse. During this retreat I became aware of how a Christ-like figure Etty is

and she helped me to get a better understanding of Jesus' Passion and Crucifixion. I would like to take her with us on this journey.

Why was Jesus crucified?

We know that crucifixion by the Romans was used for slaves and for enemies of the state. It was considered a most shameful and disgraceful way to die. Why was Jesus crucified? You are the experts, far more than I am. Let us form small groups and share our thoughts on this. I know many theological works have been written on this question and that you have often discussed it. But even so, let us share what we think/feel intuitively is the real reason of his crucifixion.

For me the main reason is fear, the fear of the ones in power that he would be a threat to them of losing their power and their security. Also, fear of the ones who were not in power that by disobeying the powerful they would lose the little they had and the way of living they are familiar with. The fear of the unknown is a powerful one.

For me it isn't completely clear why Jesus allowed himself to be crucified. I haven't come to terms with the concept that he sacrificed himself for our sins. I do believe it was an act of love: that he loved us so much, that he emptied himself and gave everything, even his life. This is life giving. Etty Hillesum helped me to understand this mystery a bit better. Reading Etty's diary again recently, I was struck by the parallel between the choices she made and the choices made by Jesus. Etty decided to go to the transit camp voluntarily. She wanted to share the common destiny of her people. She visualized this destiny: '... that part of our common destiny that I must shoulder myself; I trap it tightly and firmly on my back, it becomes part of me as I walk through the streets even now'. Patrick Woodhouse writes: 'As one ponders the image of this young Jewish woman picking up and strapping to her shoulder a burden so heavy and ugly that its weight and outline deforms her as she walks through the streets, for the reader of the New Testament it is difficult not to catch a glimpse of another Jew, on another street, bearing the burden of a 'destiny' that deformed him'. (Etty Hillesum a transformed life, p. 87).

The cross I designed for Minsteracres shows an empty figure, symbolising Jesus who emptied himself so that God could shine through him. Etty describes her deepest passion: '... There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times'. In the transit camp her greatest fear was numbness: 'At night as I lay in the camp on my plank bed surrounded by women and girls, gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing, tossing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, 'We don't want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds', I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours... and I prayed, 'Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks'.

Jesus showed us that death is not the end. In the midst of all the suffering and death there are also strong signs of life. His love overcomes death and all suffering.

To be in touch with the crucified

The very observant may have noticed that I have slightly adapted the title. I have put 'of today' between brackets, because before anything else if we want to follow Jesus, we have to be in touch with him. Not only as the great teacher of two thousand years ago but as our companion on the road who is with us and guide us. We need to spent time with him. Time in silence, time in prayer and we need to be disciplined in doing that. I think there are many forms of how we pray, there is not one way. For me it has always been important to have a good balance of prayer on my own and prayer with the ones I share my life with.

What speaks to me very deeply is the active way Etty relates to God. It is not God who abandons us or is responsible for the misery in our world. It is we who have to care for God. 'There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am in there, too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then He must be dug out again'. He must be dug out again. We need to do that. Etty also talks about a vulnerable God that needs to be protected. She writes: 'one thing has become increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God in ourselves... we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside to the last.' We need to safeguard God in ourselves.

The Crucified of today

Who are the crucified of today? I would like to share you photos and ask you to look at them and see if you can recognise the crucified or not. Don't think too much, just try to go with your first thought. We watch in silence, afterwards we turn to our neighbour and share our thoughts.

How do we define 'crucified'? Is it the same as suffering? Or is it limited to suffering caused by others? I have no answers, but want to raise questions.

Who do we sacrifice/crucify to maintain the world as we know it? Who or what do we sacrifice/crucify to keep living the life we know? I would like to focus on two: refugees and the earth.

Here in the UK there is a disproportionately critical focus on immigrants. Often there is no distinction made between the ones that come to UK because they belong to the European Union and can freely enter this country and the refugees who are asking for asylum because their life is in danger. In 2014 24,000 people asked for asylum in the UK compared with nearly 180,000 in Germany. Germany is welcoming this year 800,000 refugees or even more. Here in the UK the government is reluctant to receive 10,000 more refugees in the current refugee crisis. In the UK politicians speak of swarms of asylum seekers, people flooding the UK. We are building walls and fences to keep asylum seekers out. Often you get the idea that seeking asylum is a crime and asylum seekers are often threatened accordingly. Arrested in the early morning, not allowed to dress, taken to detention centres, left with no accommodation or financial support and not allowed to work. What is their crime? What are we afraid of??

There is no doubt that we are facing a very serious environmental crisis and that people in the poorer countries (who haven't caused it) are already suffering the consequences. We are destroying our com-

mon home ... and yet... we seem to be unable to change our lifestyle. What are we afraid of?? It's not only people who are suffering. It's creation too. We are crucifying the earth.

Our need to be in touch with the crucified of today

There are for me three reasons to be in touch with the crucified of today. Firstly we have to get in touch with our own vulnerability and face our fear. Secondly where suffering and death is, there also is life. Thirdly we are one body, the suffering of others is ours.

Facing our fear

If we don't acknowledge our fear, that fear will have power over us. Fear will fill the spaces inside us that are meant for love. We who have much are afraid to lose much. I have had the privilege to have lived in countries with no National Health Service, with people who have no pensions, no insurance, no cars and no mortgage. They have taught me what life is really about. They have taught me how to follow Christ. Life is not about saving it but sharing it. We in the west have anaesthetized ourselves. We have created false securities to protect ourselves from life risks. We think we are in control not God. And so life is getting out of control.

The life we live seems so in contradiction with the way Jesus teaches us to live: Do not worry about what you are to wear (and where to live). Do not worry about tomorrow, tomorrow has enough of its own trouble. The son of man has nowhere to lay his head.

I have been reflecting on the term: 'option for the poor'. Did Jesus opt for the poor, I wonder. He said: 'blessed are the poor, because theirs is the kingdom of God.' I was reminded of these words living with a destitute woman from Eritrea. She has been destitute for four years. She has a bad back and leg because of a not well healed broken leg when she was a child, fleeing the Ethiopian army during the war. She can't be sent back because her country is unsafe, but she hasn't got leave to remain here either. She has no income, no right to work, no permanent accommodation. She does have a very strong faith and tells me how often she sees Mary and knows that Mary is always with her. Last year her beloved nephew died in the Sahara, fleeing his home country. She was heart-broken. He was as a son to her. A week after his death she dreamt a beautiful dream. She saw three men dressed in white, one was Jesus, and the third one was her nephew. She saw his face very clearly. She was sure he is in heaven. She felt at peace.

Was Jesus' ministry directed to the poor? We tend to see poverty mostly in economic terms. Jesus shared the table with tax collectors, with prostitutes, with people outside his ethnic group. As I understand it Jesus related especially with people who were excluded for whatever reason. He connected with people, his society didn't want to involve with. Every division is not from God.

I wonder if as Christians we are not invited firstly to be poor and humble of heart. Not the option for the poor, but the option to be poor. The poor have no options, but we can make the choice and take no haversack, no extra pair of clothing. This is I believe not meant literally, but is it about where do we put our focus? The false securities we have built around us can prevent us of following Christ as God has intended.

Jesus also faced his fear for death. In Gethsemane he looked it in the eye and accepted it. So did Etty. She writes: 'I have looked our destruction, our miserable end... straight in the eye, and accepted it into my life. And my love of life has not been diminished'. It is not easy to face the facts about the environmental crisis. Here in the West we can still ignore them and continue to live the lifestyle we have become used to. However this attitude is not life giving. We need to face our destructive behaviour right in the face, become aware of it, acknowledge it and take responsibility for it. That will be life giving.

Love and life overcome death

Mary stood at the cross of her beloved son and suffered because she saw his suffering. There is something incredibly powerful of loving and being in the midst of suffering, death and despair. In the late nineties I was involved with the exhumation of mass graves in Guatemala. High in the mountain we exhumed a young mother with her daughter. They were killed in a bombing when they tried to flee the army. The husband and father was only able to quickly bury them right there where they got killed. Years later he requested the exhumation to be able to bury them with dignity in a cemetery. During the day long process of exhuming carefully the remains, the husband was sitting next to me in the grave. He didn't say anything, he didn't do anything. He was just present. This being there facing what had happened to his beloved ones was very powerful. I have no words to describe it but it is life giving, it goes beyond violence and death and somehow plays a part healing wounds. The passion of Christ is not only about Jesus' love for us, but also about his mother's love and how love overcomes death. They killed Jesus out of fear, but if we face fear then we know there is nothing to fear: death and suffering are not the end. Etty very powerfully describes how she experiences life even amidst unimaginable suffering: 'The misery here is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me. I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then, time and again, it soars straight from my heart $\text{ط}\square\hat{\text{o}}$ I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force $\text{ط}\square\hat{\text{o}}$ the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world'.

Living with people who hardly have any possessions, who don't know their future, they don't know if they are allowed to stay in this country has shown me that the only way to live life is to live the present moment, that's all we have. We so much enjoy sitting around the table for our meals and the few occasions we were able to go out and enjoy sea and sand.

Becoming aware of the suffering of creation also helps us to become aware of the wonder of creation and deeply appreciate this magnificent gift of God and how every being is an expression of God. When species become extinct we lose images of God. We often become fully aware of the love of a person when we are losing him/her. I think it is the same for creation, the danger it's in can help us to become aware of how precious it is.

Our suffering

Separation doesn't come from God. Jesus said: 'let them be one'. I don't believe that he meant we had all to become of one and the same religion. I believe that we have to come to realise that we are all created by the same creator. We are all created out of the same 'stuff' (namely stardust). We are all part of the one family, here on earth. Every division is not from God. As the word diabolic so clearly says: 'throwing apart'.

When Jesus was told that his mother, brothers and sisters had arrived to see him. He asks: 'Who is my mother, who are my brothers and sisters'. In his time as well in our times that can sound as a rejection of his own family, but I believe it isn't. It is seeing family in a wider context, beyond blood bonds. When Jesus is dying on the cross he says to his mother to accept the apostle John as her son and to John he says to accept Mary as his mother and look after her. Jesus creates life-giving family bonds outside the narrow blood connections. Although we often speak about Carmel House Community, more often we talk about being a family. We all had to leave our blood relatives behind when we came to Carmel House and now we are invited to form new family bonds with people from different corners of the world. I noticed that I really like when the children call me auntie Lya, because it reflects the close family bond I often experience with them. We are part of the 'world' family. The suffering in the world becomes something very close and even personal. A good friend of Carmel House is from Syria and shares with us her worries for her family left behind in Damascus. A young woman lived with us for five months and came from Liberia. A cousin of her died from Ebola and she was devastated. Seeing her pain was painful and brought home the suffering through this epidemic disease. It makes it so clear that we can't isolate ourselves from someone else's suffering.

St. Paul speaks about us being one body with different functions. If a foot or an eye or even the heart is ill, then it affects the whole body. Healing doesn't come just from the ill part but requires the whole body to cooperate. We can't isolate the suffering of some people as being 'their' problem, it's ours.

Modern science is giving us inside who the whole of the universe is connected and that we all made from stardust. The suffering of creation is our suffering too. As Thomas Berry said; 'You can't have healthy human beings on a sick planet'. The earth is our home says Pope Francis, but I agree with many indigenous people who say that the earth is our mother. The Earth nourishes us and shelters us, without her there is no life. The world family is not limited to people, it is the whole of creation. In the 12th century St. Francis already called every creature, no matter how small, by the name of 'sister' or 'brother'. As Pope Francis writes in his encyclical letter: '... if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of St Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled'. ('Laudato Si' p.11)

To be in touch

To be in touch is a beautiful expression. It refers to something intimate, not just a spoken word or a thought. To be in touch is something from the heart and body. Being in touch with the crucified of today is about being there with heart, soul and mind. It is about allowing ourselves really to be touched and transformed by the encounter. I think it's how space is created where resurrection can happen.