

SUFFERING AS A PLACE OF SERVICE

I was in Ghana a couple of years ago for a conference on violence against women and children. While there we visited Cape Coast Castle. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were forced through its dungeons and through the door of no return onto slave ships. There were five dungeon chambers for males. Descending down into the darkness to one of those dungeons felt claustrophobic. Two hundred men shackled and chained together stayed in that dungeon for about three months before being shipped across the Atlantic.

We stood in one of the male dungeons listening in the darkness to the whole horrific story when our guide said this: Do you know what is above this dungeon? Our heads shook – “the chapel”. Directly above two hundred shackled men – some of them dead, others screaming, all of them sitting in filth – sat God worshippers. They sang, they read the Scripture, they prayed and I suppose took up an offering for those less fortunate. The slaves could hear the service; the worshippers could sometimes hear the slaves though there were those making them behave so as not to disturb church. It took my breath away. The evil, the suffering, the humiliations, the injustice were overwhelming and the visual parable was stunning. The people in the chapel were numb to the horrific trauma and suffering beneath them.

We have dungeons in our world today too. Tent cities in Haiti, Ivory Coast, Jordan; genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia; wars around the world; and relentless, systemic violence in our own inner cities – Do you know that all of these events produce traumatized human beings? One in four soldiers is a child and 200 million children live on the streets of this world. Amnesty International says one in three females are beaten or coerced into sex or otherwise abused in their lifetime. One in three – think about that statistic next time you walk through an airport or a city street, or sit in a conference such as this or in the pews in your own church. Child sexual abuse,

child marriage, and female genital mutilation cause physical and psychological harm to countless females. Girls have acid thrown in their faces for attending school; they are stoned to death for being raped. Eastern Congo is the rape capital of the world. A recent UN human rights panel says that hundreds of thousands have been raped during the conflict there and 13% of the victims are children under the age of ten. Sex trafficking, the slavery of today, is a brutal and large-scale destructive force of girls and women today – and it is not just over there; it is here, in our own streets and cities; in *this* city. The dungeons are here, sometimes sitting next to us.

All of these things, from tent cities to abuse – things we find difficult to comprehend or hold in our minds, are endured by human beings one at a time. They result in traumatized human beings. Trauma means living with the recurrent, tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed or borne. Memories that infect victims' sleep with horrific nightmares and destroy their relationships, their capacity to work or study, torment their emotions, shatter their faith and mutilate hope. Trauma is extraordinary you see, not because it rarely happens but because it swallows up and destroys normal human ways of living. The dungeons of this world are filled with traumatized people.

As it was in Cape Coast Castle, the usual response to atrocity is to try and remove it from the mind. Those who have been traumatized want to flee the memory of its occurrence and we who hear find that we want to flee also. We find it too terrible to remember and too incomprehensible to put into words. That is why we use the phrase unspeakable atrocities. The great tension is the futile attempt to forget the unspeakable - though it continues to live on and scream in the mind. That push-pull between the need to forget and the need to speak is the central dialectic of trauma and that tension is not only experienced by individuals and families, but also by institutions and nations. It is experienced not only by the traumatized but also by those who bear witness to the trauma.

I know something of this tension because as a psychologist I have worked for 40 years with sexual abuse, rape, and domestic violence as well as combat trauma, and genocide and trafficking. I

have looked into traumatized eyes all around the world. I have seen this push-pull in my clients who are terrified to remember and speak but who cannot forget. I have witnessed families, churches and yes, nations, deny the existence of evil, abuse and trauma in their midst. I also know this tension exists in those who bear witness for it resides in me. You know, we see an atrocity on television or the internet, and soon after we look for ways to remove ourselves. Such stories threaten our comfort, our position or our system. The stories are vile and messy and very disruptive. Traumatized people need attention and assistance, often for a long time. The trauma stories of our own families, institutions and organizations get buried and geographical distance and the push of a button enable us to do the same with entire nations. Ask Rwanda. We are in fact quite like the chapel goes in the fort in Ghana.

So what are we to do? Choose complicity by turning away in silence? Flit from cause to cause trying to do something – which is sometimes about making ourselves feel better or feeding some voyeuristic need? Render judgment and categorize the traumatized and suffering as “they”? You know if “*they*” were more responsible, made better choices then “they” would not be suffering.

Under the form of worship in that chapel in Ghana laid the darkness of slavery, oppression, and tyranny – all things that blight and destroy humans created in the image of God. But I think you know Christianity does *not* look like being folded up with evil and worshipping on top of dungeons. Following Christ *does not* look like complicity with a system that butters our bread and fills our coffers built on the back of those created in the image of God. It does not look like praying and singing and giving money on top of screams, unspeakable suffering, filth and death. Christianity is not calling others “them”, somehow unlike us, not human, deserving of their suffering. Our guide pointed up to the church above and said, “Heaven above; hell below.” But I would argue that heaven was *not* above for that is not what heaven does.

What does heaven do? Heaven leaves heaven – its place of comfort, of songs, of purity, of plenty, and of money to give away. Heaven comes down. If the people of that chapel had truly worshipped God they would have been in the dungeon – in the filth and the darkness and suffering. They would have entered in *so that they might bring out*. In Acts 17:6 it says, “These men have turned the world upside down”. The church goes into the dungeon so that the dungeon becomes the church. God came down so as to lift up. God became like us so that we might become like him. He came to this dung-filled dungeon we call earth and sat with us, touched us, loved us and called us to him. He also enters the dungeons of our hearts and transforms them. He did not treat us as “them” – but became one of us so that we might be his. God is power becoming little; coming down to embrace what is alien. There is no “them” – there is only us. We were the slaves in the dungeon and he has *not* taken us out so we can stand on the heads of the oppressed and say we worship him for not leaving us there with them. He has called us as his body to follow our head – to go back into the plague-infested dung heap so other slaves might find freedom and go back with us to find yet more.

When our God interfaces with this world he leaves the higher and descends; he leaves beauty and enters chaos; he leaves pure and goes into filthy; and he demonstrates that our God does not just speak words *but also acts - first* in the heart dungeons of human beings *and then* through the lives of those same people into the dungeons of this world. Jesus demonstrated in the flesh of the character of God; his church is to do the same for the world. When God’s people worship over and separate, untouched by dungeons, they are *not* worshipping the God of the Scriptures. There is *nothing* in the Scriptures to suggest that being complicit, neutral or uncaring and deaf to the cries of humans is godly. Those Scriptures *do* say that the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle were below *because* they were *first present* in the hearts of the worshippers.

Sadly the body of Christ has often failed to see trauma as a place of service. If we survey the extensive natural disasters in our time - earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis and combine those victims with the human atrocities – the violent inner cities, wars, genocides, trafficking, violence, rapes, and child abuse we would have a staggering number. I think a look at suffering humanity would lead to the realization that trauma is perhaps the greatest mission field of the 21st century.

The people of God have sometimes hidden in chapels, worshiping, singing, giving money and sticking our heads out to tell others what they were doing wrong. We have often blamed those who suffer for their trauma; we have failed to recognize that systems can be corrupt and power abused and that *like our Lord*, many people in this world suffer from totally undeserved injustice and trauma. We have not gone to the dungeons and been blind to the fact that such refusal is merely an exposure of the dungeons of our hearts – hearts *not* like our Gods whose heart bore the anguish of this world and who entered the dungeons of this fallen world to make all things new.

Many of you see this and want to enter in and I am glad. You are in places of power and influence; in alleys and brothels. You do not want to hide in the chapel and that is good. But listen; do not be seduced – the chapel is not a place; it is a Person; it is a Head with a body. And as in the physical realm – a body that does not follow its head is a sick body. Many of you see that. It is also true that the dungeon is not a place; it is the human heart. There is no corporate greed without humans; there is no rape and abuse without humans; there are no corrupt systems without people to protect and lie.

Our first call is not to places, be they chapels or dungeons, but to Person – to love and obedience to Jesus Christ no matter the cost; to hearts that tolerate no dungeon corner to exist hidden from His light. Many have thought that if you avoid the dungeons of this world you stay clean. However, to do so is to fail to follow our Savior out onto the dung heaps of this world. Many of you are going – go; but remember this, the dungeon is first in us – that is what has created

the dungeons out there. Do not fool yourselves into thinking you follow your Savior where others have failed to do so, all the while hiding dungeons in your own souls – whether it is in pride or pornography.

Given the numbers of suffering and traumatized let me reiterate that *the trauma of this world is one of the primary mission fields of the 21st century*. It is one of the supreme opportunities before the church today. Our Head left glory and came down to this traumatized world. He became flesh like us; He literally got in our skin. He did not numb or flee the atrocities of this world or of our hearts. Will we, His body also leave our spaces, our chapels and enter the trauma of terrified and shattered humanity in the name of Jesus? We are complicit with the perpetrators if we refuse to see and enter in. We are also complicit if we go ignoring the refuse in our own hearts. If the church does not enter in, then I would ask, is she really living as the body of an incarnated God? How I pray we will follow our Head, full of the light and life of Jesus Christ in the corners of our own hearts *so that* we might truly bring Him to the trauma dungeons of this world. In doing so we will turn the world upside down, which as you know, really means turning it right side up.