Talk 1

Drop, drop, slow tears, and bathe those beauteous feet,
which brought from heaven the news and Prince of Peace.

'The Unconventional Spiritual Practice of Crying in Your Kitchen' is the title of a recent podcast episode by Emily P. Freeman, a practising Quaker Christian and Spiritual Director. In it, she describes how recently she's found herself going about her everyday life, going shopping or to an appointment, and suddenly she'll find her eyes welling up with tears. Emily describes the familiar feeling of embarrassment. The need to apologise for her tears. To regain composure as quickly as possible.

As a culture, we avoid tears and find gratuitous emotion embarrassing. In the workplace, it's unprofessional and female coded, and therefore a sign of instability. Just think of the shame levelled at Rachel Reeves when she cried during PMQs last summer. Whilst theoretically, we know that lament is the natural expression of pain and sorrow, expressing it has been trained out of us. But what if, as Freeman goes on to suggest, we chose to turn towards, instead of away from that which we find uncomfortable? What if we chose not to not rush away. To slow down and give ourselves permission to fully face and fully feel whatever it is that our souls are whispering to us about that is manifesting in tears. To cry without inhibition at what moves us, to follow where the tears lead, to consider them a gift.

This, I believe, is the intention of the first verse of Drop, Drop Slow Tears, the anthem beautifully sung by the choir last night while our feet were washed and we imagined ourselves as the disciples at the last supper. We will sing it again shortly. Now we are transported to the foot of the cross, where *Jesus'* feet are the closest part of his body to us, at head height, level with our eye line. We are face to face with torture, with agony, with evil. We can allow our tears to fall.

Whilst the gospel writers' description of the crucifixion is surprisingly stark and emotionless, laconically reporting "they crucified him," without reference to the manner or affect, it is artists, musicians and poets who help us to enter in, and supply what the gospel writers leave out. Written in 1633 by priest and poet Phineas Fletcher, and set to music shortly after by the much more famous composer, Orlando Gibbons, these three short verses are densely symbolic but the setting is simple, transparent, and austere. The meditative rhythm and meter of the music invites slow, deliberate, unhurried contemplation. And in being here today, we have taken up that invitation. We are here, intentionally taking the time to contemplate the cross for several hours, in the face of many a Bank Holiday temptation. We are present, fixing our eyes

on Jesus, whilst the rest of the world rushes on. This, I suggest, is the unconventional, counter-cultural, spiritual practice of Good Friday.

Whilst the tune *invites*, the lyrics of the first line *command*. In the imperative mood of the first line, the poet *orders* his tears to fall. For some of us it is quite difficult to access tears. We may find ourselves willing ourselves to cry, but we can't. On Good Friday it *can* be surprisingly hard to access the emotion of a shape and a story we are so familiar with, and we might ask ourselves what has led to this numbing. Perhaps we are experiencing the spiritual apathy that the desert father Evagrius of Pontus called 'acedia', or 'The Noonday Demon' – the desire to flee from the hard work of spiritual discipline back to the comforts of the world. It is a hard thing, what we're being asked to do – not only to concentrate for so long, and not look away, but to contemplate the *meaning* of what we are gazing upon. We need help to pay attention, which takes us back to the blessing of music and poetry and art.

Fletcher's tender first line lyric is less an order but the weary murmur of a wrung-out soul. There is a sense that he is giving the tears already brimming behind the eyelids, permission to fall. For Fletcher, and for some of us, tears are very much near the surface, and need no summoning at all. In our contemplation of the cross, this is somewhere we can safely grieve whatever hurt we are experiencing, because Jesus, in willingly bearing the tragedy of the world in his own body, is sharing in our pain. And feeling the ache of our deepest sadness.

Drop drop slow tears, and bathe *those beauteous feet*. This painterly description evokes an image of soft, white, perfectly unblemished feet, yet in reality Jesus' feet were beautiful because they were the exact opposite: calloused, sand-cracked and road-weary, not to mention driven through with nails. They are beautiful not in spite of the blood and dirt, but because of it. Fletcher means to remind us of one of Isaiah's many Messianic prophecies:

'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation.'

These were the feet known to the woman of Luke 7, who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, having received the good news that her sins were forgiven and her peace was restored. Her loving devotion showed that she knew in her heart that he was who he said he was - the one who came from Heaven. Her Prince of Peace.

Was this woman present at the foot of the cross? Was she weeping once more? We can only imagine the confusion and the questions her tears might silently voice. Whether she now

doubted his identity as the Son of God or not, this was her friend, her friend indeed, who at her need, and the need of so many others, his life did spend.