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Proclaiming Christ Crucified (1 Corinthians 1: 18-31)

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This week, in the wake of President Trump's extraordinary first week in office, I found myself thinking of my friends Diana and Kerry who live in California. I've known Diana since we met at Oxford in the early 1990s. When I came to the US to study, we shared a flat in Berkeley for a year and a few years after that I conducted her wedding.

Diana and Kerry are committed advocates for social justice. For years, Diana worked as a community organizer with a faith-based network and she is now a Buddhist chaplain in a California jail. Kerry founded and still runs a cleaning business which is a workers' co-operative, designed to employ Hispanic migrants on just terms and teach skills, including small business, management and advocacy skills. For obvious reasons, they are appalled by the rhetoric and policies of the new administration.

We don't know, of course, if things will continue on their current course. But – even if they do – it's feasible that my friends could have come out of this period in US history personally relatively unscathed. After all, they're white, able-bodied, healthy and well-educated; they are US citizens by birth with well-established networks of support. Although their values may be trampled on, and the shape of their community affected, it could have been that they would not be directly, materially at risk. Except for one thing. A few years ago, Diana and Kerry adopted a little girl – Lucia – who, though born in the United States, is of Guatemalan descent. And now, as I imagine it, the prospect of vilification, licensed racial profiling and abuse, is not just 'out there'. It's immediate, a clear and present danger to the daughter they love.

I share this story, because I'm trying to bring out a distinction between two kinds of experience. There's the experience of caring deeply about justice and mercy, to the point even of shaping your life's work in their service. And then, there's the experience

of undergoing on a daily basis and in an embodied way, the imminent threat of suffering injustice and the denial of a shared humanity. Tonight I want to share some tentative reflections about the relationship between these two experiences. They are reflections provoked for me by our reading and also by some of the events of the past week.

I've had the experience of suffering serious and direct injustice only once in my life – when I was bullied and slandered by a church organisation. It was a horrible time, and something I found shocking and frightening – but it was just an episode. It had its consequences, but I wasn't condemned to live a long time under conditions of threat and disregard. But, and perhaps this is or has been true for some of you, many people suffer in these ways over extended periods, or even as a more or less permanent state.

I had another friend, growing up, whose father was Nigerian. She told me of walking home from school year after year in nice suburban Canberra while passing motorists would shout racist, hate-filled abuse from their car windows. Aboriginal Australians are perpetually vulnerable to such affronting encounters; so are people who are overweight, or disabled, or wearing hijabs. There are those in our community on temporary protection visas or in detention, always at some level treated as non-persons; those who are homeless or in fear of it; those subject to domestic abuse, workplace bullying, sexual harassment, and homophobic attack.

To know yourself vulnerable in these kinds of ways is to live with a real sense of exposure. It means being unable to take for granted even the civility, let alone the care, of people around you and ultimately such experiences can colonise your very sense of self. Simone Weil called this kind of suffering 'affliction'. It affects every part of a life – social, psychological and physical – and the element of humiliation or social degradation is a key feature.

In the Roman empire, crucifixion was a form of punishment exquisitely calibrated to inflict just this kind of suffering. It involved not only agonizing physical pain, but maximum exposure and humiliation, maximum vulnerability to the disregard if not the

derision of those who pass by. After all, no one wants to risk being associated with someone in this position – too dangerous, too much like social death.

And this, I think, is what makes Paul's words in tonight's reading so shocking. Because when he speaks of Christ crucified, *this* is what he's talking about. He's not just speaking descriptively of the *manner* of Jesus' death – he's evoking the shame of it, the utter desolation of dying outside the city, outside the law, rejected, abandoned and despised by almost all. In another place he speaks of Christ 'becoming a curse for us' (Galatians 3: 13), occupying the place of the cursed one. And yet, bizarrely, almost unbelievably, *this* is what Paul wants to proclaim. He has come to believe that Christ, afflicted, crucified, accursed, is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God'. Can you hear how these words strain at the edge of sense? Theologically speaking they turn the world upside down, and Paul says they can only appear as 'foolishness' to our normal ways of understanding God and the human good. So what is he saying? And how does it help?

To proclaim Christ crucified, as Paul does, is to say that this place of affliction, of shame and dereliction, has been entered into and undergone by God. This is the abyss, the worst that can befall us, the suffering most threatened by meaninglessness – and here, Paul says, Christ has come and known it from the inside. Known it – and broken its power over us. How? By revealing that even this place cannot separate us from the love, the life and the grace of God.

At one level, when we're in the midst of such experiences, this feels like small consolation – we're still bullied, unjustly treated, inhumanly negated. But the critical piece is that as we trust this 'message about the cross', as we dare to meet Christ in our places of dereliction, we discover that who we most deeply are is not defined by this and cannot be destroyed. We have an identity, a belonging in the love of God that is stronger than the disregard of the world. Slowly we even begin to realize that our greatest strength lies in our weakness, for it is in our weakness that we know most clearly that the real source of our life and our only ultimate security is God. And sourced here, we are newly empowered to challenge injustice, to care for ourselves as God does.

In Paul's view, the mistake the Corinthians are making is to forget this, and to fall away from vulnerability and dependence. They are quarrelling with one another, jostling for status, seeking to secure life on the grounds of their own excellence. That's why he reminds them of their essential lowliness and 'nothingness': 'Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth ...'. He's not being mean to them. He's reminding them that the whole point of believing is that they don't have to compete for place and success; he's saying that God precisely 'chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not' so that no one has the illusion that they can make it with God on their own terms, so that no one 'might boast in the presence of God'.

And this (I believe) is hugely important for our practice of justice. For to meet God in affliction, to be willing to dwell with God in our own nothingness, which is what it means to be joined to the crucified Christ, profoundly affects our relationship to the suffering, the affliction of others. It means we are not 'other' than them, and we cannot condescend to them (even nicely) from our superior vantage point. It means that even if we have been spared the worst, as they have not, we share in precisely the same vulnerability and exposure and dependence. And the more we can accept that vulnerability and dependence in ourselves, the more we really know it as the truth of our lives, then the more we see ourselves as members one of another. We cannot do good 'at' them. We are unable to separate our good from the good of all. No longer can we care about and work for justice from a safe or semi-safe distance; these are (in some sense) our bodies too.

The implications of all this, I am still wrestling with – trying to discern. But let me finish here. We are called to join with Christ in his passion for justice, his willingness to enter into the abyss so as to set us free from its power, his choosing 'what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are'. And the question I'm left with is, what does that look like for me, for us – in our prayer, in our action, in our speech – in the weeks, months and maybe years to come?