

Proverbs 27:5-6 The wounds of a friend

In this strange new world of Coronavirus lockdown, Jenny and I have recently been catching up with a few TV programmes that we had recorded a while back. This week we just watched the film *Florence Foster Jenkins* – curiously interspersed with Christmas adverts.

It's billed as a comedy, based on the true story of, indeed, Florence Foster Jenkins, who was, I suppose you'd call her, a New York socialite, back in the days leading up to and during the Second World War. By all accounts she had contributed very substantially to musical performing arts in that city over several decades.

But I said *billed* as a comedy ... and yet there were clearly elements of tragedy in her life, too. The main one, around which the film centres, was this woman's total lack of realisation that she *didn't* herself have the superb voice that she *thought* she did. So when she insisted on doing public performances, most notably at New York's Carnegie Hall, her friends were kept busy insulating her from any negative comments on her singing.

The climax to the film comes when a prominent newspaper music critic publishes a scathing review of this Carnegie Hall performance ... but look, I don't want to spoil it for you, do see it yourself. Meryl Streep is on superb form – and actually I think she must have a pretty decent voice herself, if she can manage to sing so *badly* when she needs to.

But the question that the film left with me, actually, was ... were those people who kept the truth from Florence Foster Jenkins actually good friends to her?

You see the same thing with modern TV shows like X-Factor, where, rumour has it, they deliberately let some people through who have more like the Z Factor. They have convinced themselves – and people around them have convinced them, too – that they are superbly vocally talented. But they are plainly not.

And that's what makes the early rounds of X-Factor such compulsive viewing, I want to suggest. It is so tempting to want to laugh at those poor self-deluded kids, mostly. And when their mums, usually, are interviewed after Simon Cowell has done his usual verbal demolition of their kids' *lack* of talent, they scream and cry and protest that the judges are so *wrong* and mean.

And we sit back so superior to them, thinking probably how stupid or maybe even how wicked those mums are, to have encouraged their kids to have such unrealistic notions about their abilities.

So you see, Proverbs is exactly right here. It chimes in perfectly with our instincts, when we think about cases like this. Friends, *true* friends, don't always say things that are nice, things we *like* to hear. There are times when a real friend must say something that *hurts* us to hear.

Better is open rebuke than hidden love.

(Proverbs 27:5)

There are times when we need to hear, Actually, no, you can't. Actually, that was foolish. Actually, that was *sinful*, even. That rebuke is not an affront to love, but an *expression* of love.

We *need* to know that we are not hitting that top note. Or that I said something unwise when I ad-libbed during a sermon, or re-used that story or illustration *yet again*. (Jenny will tell me.) Or that my bum *does* look big in this. Or stuff like that. A true friend deals in truth – spoken kindly, as far as possible – but to hide love and say nothing is *not* what you and I need from our friends.

In fact, for once, in this part of the book of Proverbs, the thought of one line overflows into the next. At first you might think this is mostly a restatement of the previous verse.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

(Proverbs 27:6)

But that second part of the verse – can you see the typical kind of Hebrew poetry there, two lines that illustrate truth together by means of contrast? “Friend” is the opposite of “enemy”. “Wounds” are the opposite of “kisses”.

But this verse hasn't just pointed me back to everyday life, although it does have a very clear application there, the kind of thing that we see in the NT in

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ...

(Ephesians 4:15)

But instead that verse from Proverbs

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

(Proverbs 27:6)

has taken me back to that pivotal week in all of human history. That first Holy Week. That first Easter. Let me take you first to Gethsemane, that garden where the Lord Jesus went first of all to pray ... and was then betrayed.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

(Matthew 26:36-37)

Don't think it was easy for Jesus. Remember what we are taught about him, both fully God and fully man. He knew about pain. It's necessary for a body to function within its normal safe limits. Pain is a warning to stop doing what you're doing – or an incentive to not perform that particular action again. If Jesus had carried on his father's carpentry trade – or possibly more like all-round jobbing builder, we'd maybe say nowadays – and had had to train up in the skills of that trade, there would have been times when the hammer didn't hit the nail but hit his finger instead. That kind of bio-feedback very rapidly disinclines you to get it wrong over and over. A single wallop with a hammer you can most likely recover from; but *repeated* wallops will risk more permanent damage. So your body screams at you: DON'T go there.

So he had first-person experience of splinters and the sharp points of nails. Would he have seen crucifixions before? Possibly, I'm guessing. But it was plain from just common sense, and the way people knew it was the worst of agonising deaths to die, and from his own experience of pain, that *his* crucifixion would be no less physically horrendous. To know that this was inescapable, yes, that would be quite enough to render him "sorrowful and troubled".

But even that was not going to be the whole of his suffering. There would be human failings, mental anguish, too. He had just told his disciples,

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' "

(Matthew 26:31)

And there was to be one particular disciple ...

And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."

(Matthew 26:21)

You know how that betrayal took place, don't you?

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him."

(Matthew 26:47-48)

And that takes us back to Proverbs:

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

(Proverbs 27:6)

But that is actually a rather surprising translation. "Friend" and "enemy" are obvious opposites, but "faithful" and "profuse" aren't. In fact, the AV uses a different, perhaps more fitting word, which is just as good a translation:

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.

(Proverbs 27:6)

You can see where they overlap, though. You can start to become suspicious of someone's sincerity if they seem to be asserting something over and over ... profusely ... far more strongly than is necessary. You start to think to yourself, *Why all this insistence? Are they over-compensating for what they actually know is a lie or a sham?*

And it would have had to be the case that Judas, when he came to betray Jesus, made that traditional Jewish greeting unusually clear, so there could be no mistake, no confusion.

And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him.

(Matthew 26:49)

But aren't Jesus' words of answer now really strange?

Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do."

(Matthew 26:50)

Friend? Seriously? How could Jesus say this at *that* point, the actual moment of betrayal? Yes, he had seen it coming. Yes, back in Gethsemane, *this* was possibly one of the things that, remember, caused him to “become sorrowful and troubled”. But there is something far less visible, far less obvious, in what he knew his forthcoming death on the cross was all about:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, ...

(1 Peter 2:24)

And bearing sins would mean experiencing the wrath of the God who is holy, holy, holy:

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ... “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

(Matthew 27:46)

Here's following through the reason, here's the why. *Why* did he bear our sins in his body? What was the purpose and intention of it?

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

(1 Peter 2:24)

See that word *wounds* there?

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

(Proverbs 27:6)

And does that make you think, too, just how strange and wonderful is that word “friend” there? It was levelled at Jesus as an accusation by the self-righteous, initially. But doesn't it fit here, at the cross? Even to Judas, “friend”. In contrast to the abstemious John the Baptist,

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ ”

(Matthew 11:19)

Yes, and *faithful* are the wounds of that friend. So when Peter insists that

By his wounds you have been healed.

(1 Peter 2:24)

he's picking up on what had been stated hundreds of years earlier, in that chapter we read together on Good Friday:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

(Isaiah 53:4-5)

And that illustrates another side to that word “faithful”, I thought. Dependable. Reliable. Even if predicted 600 years earlier, that moment was always coming when that

suffering servant's wounds would grant his people healing and salvation. And not just Isaiah, said Jesus.

There was that most wonderful of Bible studies we read about in Luke's Gospel. It's resurrection day – though, in those days, news did not spread globally and instantaneously. So there are two confused and dejected disciples of Jesus trudging the several hours along the road to a village by the name of Emmaus.

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

(Luke 24:13-14)

And then the impossible happens. They are greeted by a dead man. *The* dead man. But, despite their familiarity with him, they do not see what is before them.

While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

(Luke 24:15-16)

And as now the three of them walk along together, the earlier conversation of the two is first of all disrupted ... and then picks up again as Jesus asks an innocuous question.

And he said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?"

(Luke 24:17)

It's almost as if they don't want to mention now, in front of this stranger, what they had been saying together. So there's a slightly evasive answer:

And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

(Luke 24:17-18)

But no, Jesus is not going to let them off this hook. Innocently, he asks:

And he said to them, "What things?"

(Luke 24:19)

And then it all just tumbles out:

And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him."

(Luke 24:19-20)

Their lives have just been shattered. Their lips probably tremble as they say this.

"But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

(Luke 24:21)

But now it's even worse. There are crazy rumours flying around.

“Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive.”

(Luke 24:21-23)

We've tried checking it out, and we're just ending up more confused and more distraught!

“Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.”

(Luke 24:24)

I don't think we should read the next words as a rebuke. I remember when our kids were small, and still occasionally needed a bit of help with homework. Maybe you've done the same with yours. You check through what they've written, and you notice a key mistake in what they've written. Quite a silly mistake, even. They've misremembered their multiplication tables, perhaps, despite having it drilled into them. Or they've just remembered totally the *wrong* word in Spanish or French. Or what has a minus sign in front of it should be a plus sign. You gently point it out. *Ah!* they say. Or *Oh!*

And at that point I would maybe give them a hug, and say something meant to convey that it's just a slip – but *they* hadn't slipped in my estimation of them. My word was taken from the old BBC “Watch with Mother” programmes when I was a kid. I would gently smile, and maybe tap them on the head lightly, and call them a *woodentop*. Maybe you said, gently, *Derrr!* Or maybe *daft-head*, something like that. I think that's what we have here in Luke 24, as the Friend of sinners sets things straight for his downhearted disciples.

And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

(Luke 24:25-26)

Folks, notice the *all* and the *and* there. And factor that into what Paul said about what Christians believe.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ...

(1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

There are those “wounds” - *faithful* wounds - “of a friend”. *Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures*. Believe that. But believe *all* that the prophets have written: *that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures*, too.

Those wounds are not just faithful to *you*, but faithful to God's plan down through the ages. It is precisely what Jesus told his followers, when they realised that he was actually the Messiah. Yes ... *but THIS is what that is going to mean:*

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.

(Mark 8:31)

Remember that *all*: all that the prophets have said. Death, yes. Resurrection, yes, that too. And back on that Emmaus road, too. The *all* ... and the *and*.

“Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

(Luke 24:26)

Not “and enter into his tomb”, not “and enter into oblivion”. Not even “and enter into history”. But “enter into his *glory*.” Suffer these things ... *and* enter into his glory.

Folks, the final thing that proves that

Faithful are the wounds of [this] friend;

(Proverbs 27:6)

is that *this* Jesus came back to life again. Literally. Physically. Bodily. Though also mysteriously. But for real and definite. It is not just that we have encountered him and that we proclaim him faithful, that one who

... having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

(John 13:1)

It is that God in heaven proclaims him faithful, by means of what we remember and celebrate today:

... declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ...

(Romans 1:4)

Folks, yes, remember the faithful wounds of this Friend of sinners. But remember too his faithful words:

When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

(John 19:30)

And rejoice that it was not *Jesus* who was finished, but his sufferings. Rejoice in his resurrection. There is our proof. There is our hope, our well-founded hope, of eternal life. Or *he*, I should say, is our hope, and our example, and our trail-blazer ... our risen lord and saviour.

Grace to you and peace ... from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

(Revelation 1:4-6)