Friday Lent Week Two

Joy in the grip of despair: a contradiction. Paradoxes are positive contradictions by which truth slips out of our sealed preconceptions and packaged thinking. The Greek for ‘truth’ (*aletheia*) means *disclosure* or a *clearing*. Whenever we have the truth wrapped up we are in for a surprise, sometimes pleasant, sometime hard. God always takes us by surprise when we see *Him or Her* happening. We catch a glimpse of an imperceptible presence that doesn’t fulfil our wishes but lets us know it is there.

Some years ago a young woman told me of how she had once felt this in so ordinary way that it seemed silly to speak of God in it at all. She was in a deep sadness and felt quite desperate. A relationship in which she given all of herself had gone through a meltdown and seemed destroyed.

She was numbed by emotional waves making her dizzy with a sense of unreality. She felt guilt, anger, and abandonment, darts of denial and foolish mental bargaining, deep grief. It was a death agony. To really die while still alive is so awful that, understandably, thoughts of choosing to end it all arose. Why not die now rather than hang on a cross with nothing to hope for but death?

One day. on her way to work, she realised that her sweater was full of holes and decided to buy a new one. In a shop she saw a range of sweaters she liked. As she was looking, a sales assistant appeared. As the young woman was getting a respite from her heavy emotions, looking at the colours and styles, she felt irritated But the assistant didn’t go away and turned out to be genuinely helpful and concerned and had good taste. Between them they made a choice.

Pointing to the holes in her old sweater, the young woman said she would wear the new one immediately. As they went to pay, the assistant, an older foreign woman, said that if the woman had twenty minutes, she would repair the old sweater for her with no charge. The young woman was totally, wordlessly taken by surprise. Less than twenty minutes later, it was repaired so well she couldn’t see where the holes had been. She offered money to the assistant but was strongly refused. As she sought words to thank the older woman, her own emotions welled up uncontrollably and she began to weep. She looked at the older woman, pressed her hand and hurriedly left the shop.

I thought of this story a few weeks ago walking with the pilgrims early in the morning on the Via Dolorosa. Three times on his way to the Cross, Jesus fell. It was physically, emotionally all too much. At the first fall, a passer-by, who entered history that day, Simon of Cyrene, was made to help him carry the Cross. His helping didn’t prevent the Crucifixion. But we remember it two millennia later.

Entombed in her despair, what did the young woman feel, surprised by that extraordinary grace from a shop assistant? A stranger, who sensed her customer’s overwhelming sadness and was moved, not to intrude, but to manifest a presence greater than herself in an uncalled-for act of kindness.