

Brokenness, confession and forgiveness

We all have pictures of brokenness locked away in the vault of our mind. For me, being made redundant from a job that I loved was a time that I felt particularly broken.

On 4th January 2010, I was handed a 'notice of intended redundancy' by Peterborough City Council, for whom I'd worked for 20 years. The service was undergoing a re-structure and it wasn't certain if my job as heading up a multi-agency Sure Start Children's Centre, would be needed any longer. For the following six months, I lived with that uncertainty until on Monday 28th June, I received the news I had been dreading – on Thursday July 1st, just three days later, my job would be no more. In the climate of recession, posts were being frozen when they became vacant, not advertised, and there was no certainty I would get another job very soon.

On the Wednesday night as I drove away from the centre, the reality of the situation hit me. Not only was I leaving a centre that I'd seen built from scratch, but I was also leaving a fantastic team, many of whom were good friends, and also many vulnerable parents and children with whom I'd built trusted relationships with over the years. I began to cry, and stopped at the end of the road –

driving through tears is never a good idea - just as the hymn we've just sung started to play on the CD player in the car. I'd been listening to the CD on my way into work that morning and this was where it had stopped as I turned the engine off. As the CD re-started, these words spoke into my very being:

Still, my soul be still
and do not fear
though winds of change may rage tomorrow.
God is at your side
no longer dread
the fires of unexpected sorrow.

God, you are my God
and I will trust in you and not be shaken
Lord, of peace renew
a steadfast spirit within me
to rest in you alone.

These words brought hope into a broken situation, as did words from Scripture. During Lent that year, I'd started reading the Church of England daily lectionary readings - a Psalm and a reading from both the Old and New Testament - as a discipline to try and read my Bible more. On the day I learned my job was gone, the reading for the

day was Isaiah 43 v1-3. A modern translation has this passage as *'Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine. When you're in over your head, I'll be with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end. Because I am your God, your personal Saviour.'*

The Psalm for the next day was Psalm 71. A modern translation of the first two verses read, *'I run for dear life to God, I'll never live to regret it. Do what you do well: get me out of this mess and up on my feet.'* As the wheels of the redundancy process ground on – I was on 'garden leave' pending meetings to try and identify other suitable jobs, there were many times when God spoke to me through the words of hymns and songs in church, prayers of intercession that just hit the spot, sermons preached that spoke directly to me and words of encouragement from people both close to me and not. Whilst it continued to feel scary at times, I *did* trust that God was in control, and on the day I received a job offer, five months later, the Psalm for the day was an extract from Psalm 73: *'Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory'*.

Just as God had been faithful to the people of Israel, through all their years of turning away from him, so God was faithful to me. The situation wasn't as it was before – what was lost wasn't restored, but it was good enough. And I learned much about trusting God in the process. Trusting that even when things appear at their most broken, restoration can come.

A few weeks ago, Esther, Maggie and I were at a Christian conference in Harrogate, and we heard a chap called Patrick Regan speak on the subject of 'when your faith gets shaken'. He told us about 'kintsugi' or 'kintsukuroi', the Japanese art form of repairing broken pots with a special lacquer mixed with gold, silver or platinum. Kintsugi means 'golden joinery' in Japanese. Through this process, the broken places are highlighted in ways that bring greater beauty to the piece than would be possible without the break, and the pieces themselves end up being more valuable than they were before.

Patrick and his wife Diane, having been through some incredibly tough times themselves, are using the art form to help people discover treasure in life's scars, and have set up a charity called Kintsugi Hope where, in small groups, people can come together, share in their common humanity, gain strength and wholeness through

friendship, and learn how to grow and heal together. Through his own experience of difficulties, Patrick encourages us to let go of the 'I'm OK' front that we so often put on for others, but to allow ourselves to have the courage to be vulnerable, to let our true selves be seen. He also says that we need to let go of the need to be in control, to acknowledge that we are *not* God, and to lament when things go wrong. The Psalms are great for this as over 40% of them are cries of lament. These words from Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day
have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
Look on me and answer, O Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy
will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.
How *honest* is that?

They say that anxiety is caused by trying too hard to be accepted and liked, not wanting to do anything wrong. Or trying to stay too strong for too long. But God says that we're not on our own. And that, even when we're up against it, he'd rather us yell at him, to rail against our circumstances, rather than be silent and ignore him. We need to know that God is our dad, our heavenly Father, who longs to hold us, because there are times when we all just need to be held. So, we shouldn't be ashamed of our scars because, like the Kintsugi pots, our heavenly Father is in the business of restoring the broken into things of beauty. And in all of us, he sees beauty. Ephesians 2:10: '*For we are God's handiwork.*' And God only creates things of beauty. The key is to see ourselves as God sees us.

Brokenness comes in many shapes and forms. None of us will travel through this life and escape all experiences of brokenness. For me, at that time, it was redundancy. For others it will be the death of a loved one, bankruptcy, a marriage breakdown, or other crises. Brokenness also can come when we realise we have left God's path and turned away from him. When this happens, sin crashes into our lives and we face a deep level of spiritual brokenness that can only be healed by the gracious hand

of God. This was the kind of brokenness Nehemiah and the people experienced due to a pattern of habitual sin and hardheartedness. Chapter 9 catalogues in detail Israel's long history of turning away from God and his ways, away from the Covenant, the promise that was made with Abraham, the promise of a land of milk and honey, where the people - God's chosen people - would grow and prosper, and be a light to the nations. But, they became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey God's commands. Sin crept in and they began to worship other Gods, making for themselves an image of a calf.

But God did not abandon them.

The promise was fulfilled and they entered the Promised Land, only to then turn away again, which led to the exile to Babylon. And still they haven't learned, for the sins they confess at the start of the chapter, when they come together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their foreheads, are sins of turning away, of going their own way, not God's. And just as it always did, it lands them in trouble. They're a broken people, and the only thing they can do is confess and ask God's forgiveness.

And so it is with us too. Nothing can take us to place of utter brokenness like sin in our lives and the refusal to

confess it. When we're in this state and sin is ruling us, nothing seems right. The only cure for this sickness of the soul is honest, humble confession.

How do we do this? From the example of Nehemiah and the remnant in Jerusalem, we can see four important and life-changing steps. The first is assuming personal responsibility. We don't blame anybody else, we don't rationalise, and we don't twist the truth. *'They stood in their places and confessed their sins'* we read.

Secondly, we acknowledge God's prerogative to judge us. He is God and we are not. We are the ones who have sinned and he has the right to judge us, but we give thanks that he is a *'forgiving God, slow to anger and abounding in love.'* How many of us knew that these words, words we know so well, come from the book of Nehemiah?

Thirdly, we ask for forgiveness, but, unlike in Nehemiah's time, we ask forgiveness in *Jesus'* name, knowing that he paid the price for our sins on the cross. And fourthly, we rest in the promise of his cleansing and healing. Some people are forever saying, *'I asked for forgiveness, but I just don't know if I've received it.'* They can't rest in the grace that has been promised them because they can't

believe they've been forgiven, or struggle to forgive themselves. Through the work of Jesus on the cross, the power of his resurrection, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can accept and rest in the cleansing that comes from Jesus. We are forgiven!

So, to conclude. Is there something, during this time of Lent, for which you need to ask God's forgiveness? Something that is causing you to feel broken and in need for healing? God longs for each of us to walk and live in the rest of forgiveness. This is why he offered the life of his only Son on the cross. Or is there something that you need to forgive in another. Take time to think about anyone who still needs your forgiveness.

And know that our heavenly Father is in the business of restoring the broken into things of beauty. That, just like the Kintsugi pots, he can make us more beautiful than we were before. *'Behold, I am making everything new'* he promises. And it starts with us.

Amen.