

Chapel speech

Everyone in this room can probably think of what they would call their hard times. When times were particularly difficult, when they had to struggle to achieve something. This might not go for every single person, but even billionaires will happily talk about their struggles.

It's seen as an inevitable part of life I think. A point of relation. One of the most common responses to hearing about a someone's struggles is to commiserate, to share a similar story. In fact, when we can't, it often feels uncomfortable.

We often see it as a point of pride even. How many times has an older relative complained about the younger generation having it easier for whatever reason? Or the younger generation complaining about others 'not getting' their struggles?

This comes into my title for today – martyrdom. There is a cultural idea or – as I would argue – *myth* around struggle, around suffering, and what it means. There is this idea that suffering, struggle, makes us more resilient. That ultimately, we should be proud of what we've gone through, to give it meaning. What we've worked through has made us who we are.

It's a common thread in the stories we tell, about both fictional characters and real people. We talk about the obstacles they faced, the forces they had to challenge. In stories we refer to these obstacles as *character building*, shaping the figure themselves.

This idea is baked into most, if not all, stories and the way we think about them. Think about the figures that were talked about last term. Heracles is inseparable from his labours, King Arthur and his knights from their search for the Holy Grail, Shrek and his rejection from society. Their struggles are the touch stone of their narratives in many ways, and while individual elements of their struggles are emphasised differently depending on the audience for the story, this core of struggle is preserved.

When we think about the people that inspire us we often focus less on the *what* they achieved, but, again, what was in the way of them achieving those goals. The adversity they had to face, and in most cases, triumph over. Their triumph over adversity is what is celebrated, with the achievement itself being less emphasised. They inspire us to face the challenges in our own lives with determination, assuring us that, if they had the strength to overcome their obstacles (which are often bigger than our own), then so do we.

There is comfort in this. It plays into an idea about inherent justice within the world – that those that struggle, that suffer, will see some repayment in some form, that they will be, ultimately, vindicated. The idea that suffering has meaning and purpose brings a comfort.

But it does beyond just a comfort, doesn't it. The amount of suffering someone has experienced can be seen as a marker of moral value. That people deserve the privileges they have because of the suffering they have gone through – they have

earned their privilege. To call someone privileged can be seen as an insult against someone's character. This type of reaction can (and I would argue *should*) be dismissed as an obvious sign of insecurity, but it does come from deep seated cultural values around suffering and meritocracy. Our superiors, we are told, have *earned* their position, and those that challenge it, that try to examine why those in positions of power have that power, are being disrespectful in some way.

It is in these moments, often, when those from marginalised backgrounds who have achieved success are most weaponised. 'Well this person was able to overcome those barriers so why can't others'. The strength of one individual is used to undermine that of others, and minimise the existence of those barriers in the first place. Marginalised people who have succeeded can fall into this trap as well – I can think of members of my own community that will denigrate those who argue for justice through the use of their own success – especially because they feel threatened by the idea that they might also have some level of privilege.

These ideas, these feelings, are baked into Christianity. There are many passages which reinforce this idea, the most famous probably being Matthew 5 – the Sermon on the Mount. But I have reservations that these passages are often misused.

When we think about Christianity's role in society, particularly in Western Europe, it has often been institutionalised, holding some role within the power structures that exist. It is not hard to see the hypocrisy of a monarch assuring the literal peasants beneath them that their meekness, their poverty, will earn them a place in heaven. But even in the modern day, a common understanding of this passage, is that, even if there is not justice on Earth, there will be justice in Heaven, that those that suffered in this life will be rewarded in the next.

Again, this is a comforting idea. But comfort is not always good – it can very often lead to complacency. At all levels within a hierarchy it can lead to satisfaction at the status quo – those towards the top can rest assured that their position is earned, those towards the bottom can hope of one day achieving justice. Christianity is not unique in being coopted to provide this comfort – in a highly capitalistic, and increasingly secular world, we see the narrative no longer focusing around religious ideas of cosmic justice, but around the idea, or again, myth of meritocracy. That those that work hard will see their just reward, and that those that don't clearly aren't skilled enough, or working hard enough. And while there are many, *many*, arguments against the actual existence of meritocracy within our system, and the so-called 'self-made' billionaire, here I want to focus on Christianity – and what I take from its teachings on suffering.

Jesus, in many ways, is the ideal martyr. He suffers, yes, but he is unbroken, and his ultimate suffering, his death, comes with the forgiveness of all sins and the promise of eternal life for all. And this suffering is righteous. Jesus is tested and challenged repeatedly and does not waver. And yet the Bible makes it clear, I would argue that it is not his suffering that makes Jesus great, but his capacity for love in spite of it. Hebrews 2: verse 18 makes this most clear – Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. He is fully human because he suffered, and is therefore able to understand and help us. Suffering is

not primarily a point of righteousness, but a point of empathy. When Jesus is tested in the Wilderness in Matthew 4, he refuses the immediate offer from Satan (or the tempter) of power instead accepting humility under God. To me this passage has deep resonance – it is a refusal of Jesus to put himself above others. When he has just been offered the wealth of all the world, Jesus chooses to abandon this and go among the poor and the sick and heal them – essentially choosing an act of love over power.

And going back to Matthew 5 (the chapter that immediately follows), do we interpret this as Jesus saying to those in poverty that they should accept their lot because of the promises of Heaven? Considering Jesus's opposition to many of the powerful at the time, it reads more to me as a radical call to action. That those that are suffering need not suffer. That a future exists where this suffering can be resolved, and true justice can be achieved. Jesus's words here to me are a confirmation that an end to the suffering that so many face is possible.

And even beyond the way we talk about suffering defanging what is a radical call for justice, it can reduce our capacity to show empathy for those who need it, and sometimes even ourselves. What it can let us forget is that suffering does not always strengthen us. When I reflect upon my own journey I am often confronted with the fact that a lot of the things I have gone through have left me more fragile, even for a long time afterwards. When we think of those in need, I think this needs to be the focus. That suffering leaves us in more need for community.

I do very much empathise with this way of thinking, with wanting to attribute meaning to suffering, especially those who are marginalised. But when we reduce all suffering to inspiration, and, at its extreme, to martyrdom, we can miss or forget the fact that much of the suffering that exists in this world is due to injustice, and is unnecessary. We don't need to completely throw out this line of thinking, but we do need to be critical about how we frame suffering, and what we centre – which should be, as people with and without faith, empathy for those suffering, and indignation that it should happen in the first place.