

SUFFERING and STRUGGLE

by Bob Stradling

These two words were tentatively shared with / given to Waverley Abbey Trust after a prayer meeting at a local church in September 2021. There were plenty of other words of encouragement, but it was these words in particular that caught my attention.

For so many of us, suffering and struggle is our lived experience, and was even before the pandemic, but I am conscious that the pandemic has exacerbated the suffering and the depth and duration of the struggle for so many.

Why do I start with these rather gloomy words? Well because as I read the scriptures, I find portions that over and over again talk about the suffering and the struggle we all have to endure. In Psalm 6, for example, we read of the psalmist crying out, 'Have mercy on me,

Lord, for I am faint; heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony.'¹ We don't know what the psalmist's specific condition was that meant that his bones were in agony, but on a personal level I can relate to this as I have an underlying medical condition which means that sometimes it feels like my bones too are in agony!

As I look around my colleagues at Waverley Abbey Trust and the faculty of Waverley Abbey College, I am conscious of the individual journeys within which suffering and struggle have been writ large. A colleague with MS, for example, another who helped care for his wife over twenty years as she succumbed to the same terrible disease, childlessness, those who have suffered loss of children, and others who have suffered the breakdown of intimate

relationships. Suffering and struggle lived out in the everyday.

None of us are immune and exempt from suffering and struggle, and for many of us these difficult lived experiences can help us, as Dan Allender² wrote about in his 'Leading with a Limp'. It was, I admit, initially difficult for me to share about my own illness as I didn't want to expose my vulnerability, but preferred to pretend, instead, that I was as strong and as vital as I have always been. I have found, though, that sharing my story and allowing myself to become vulnerable has been helpful to many others, helping them to realise that we do not need to be perfect and tell a perfect story in order to be used by God.

I have observed amongst my colleagues that it is often by drawing upon their experiences of suffering and struggle that they are able to help, teach and train the next generation of counsellors. Indeed, so many come forward to train as counsellors precisely because they have experienced suffering and struggle, and have themselves received help from a competent and ethical counsellor on their journey of recovery and restoration.

In Isaiah 61, we see beautiful imagery of restoration. The writer and speaker Jennifer Rees Larcombe, who has herself experienced tragedy in terms of debilitating illness and marital breakup, but has also found miraculous healing, used this passage to help give name to the ministry she founded, 'Beauty from Ashes'³ with the expressed purpose of helping to redeem the suffering and struggle so many people face.

Isaiah 61 also talks about 'restoring the ancient ruins' and that resonates strongly with us here at Waverley Abbey as we quite literally have the ancient ruins of Waverley Abbey in our grounds. They are a popular place for people to come, and whilst I think it unlikely that English Heritage or the local

council would give us permission to actually rebuild the abbey, they are interested and supportive as we start to explore how we can reimagine what abbey life would look like today.

It is clear that as we experiment and develop what we do at Waverley Abbey College, it will not look anything like the life of the old abbey. However, we hope it carries something of its heritage. The abbey would originally have provided, amongst other things, a place of Welcome, Worship, Wellbeing, Work, Wisdom and Witness. It is easy to see how we resonate today with those '6 Ws' as we endeavour to provide a place of learning and wisdom, welcome and wellbeing here at Waverley in a modern era.

Some of our students might also say it is a place of struggle (but, we hope, not suffering) as they grapple with new ideas and concepts and read widely in preparation for assignments that then need to be written up to set deadlines.

It is helpful to return to words speaking of suffering and struggle. St. Paul was no stranger to either of these things and in 2 Corinthians gives a list of some of the things he had endured: 'Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move⁴ and on it goes, this litany of woes.

So what did this experience do to Paul? Did it turn him in on himself and his back to God? The answer is found in his letter to the church in Rome and somewhat surprisingly, he found himself on a different spiritual and emotional journey; 'Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope'.⁵

I must admit I find it difficult

to 'glory' in suffering, but I do, nevertheless, find the journey of suffering that Paul describes as encouraging, as it helps to bring some sense of purpose to this experience. Later in the letter he writes 'If we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory'.⁶ It could be understood that part of our adoption into God's family incorporates sharing in the suffering that Jesus endured. We are also called co-workers with God and part of that work and privilege could be that we share in his suffering.

Training as a counsellor is not easy, but often without us realising it, there is a process of transformation taking place, that helps to develop our character. It is this character or integrity of the soul that people respond to and which gives them hope that we can support them on their own journey of suffering and struggle, whatever that may be.

I am not sure that I can make complete sense of this whole issue and there is too little space here to do a full analysis of suffering.

I leave you, though, with one thought or promise and that is that one day suffering will come to an end, and there will no longer be any need for counsellors to

assist people make sense of the suffering and struggle. 'They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'.⁷

It would seem that something worthwhile (even something beautiful) can be built out of the hardships we go through.

Notes

- 1 Psalm 6:2 (NIV).
- 2 Leading With a Limp, Dan B Allender, Waterbrook Multnomah, January 2008
- 3 <https://www.beautyfromashes.co.uk>
- 4 2 Corinthians 11:24-26 (NIV)
- 5 Romans 5:3-4 (NIV)
- 6 Romans 8:17 (NIV)
- 7 Revelation 21:3-4 (NIV)

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About the author

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