Scarecrow Crying

In her 1999 album, Breakdown, American singer-songwriter Melissa Etheridge included a song called Scarecrow. This song was dedicated by Etheridge to a young man named Matthew Shepard.

Shepard's story is a tragic one. A student attending university in Wyoming, America, Shepard was tied to a fence and beaten, set fire to, and otherwise tortured over a period of 18 hours. He was then left to hang on the fence until a passing cyclist discovered him, barely alive. The cyclist later reported that he initially thought the figure on the fence was a scarecrow - hence the title of the song - until he discovered on closer inspection that it was a human being.

When found, Shepard was said to have been so severely beaten that his face was covered in blood - except where the tracks of his tears had left a clear passage across his skin. Matthew Shepard died in hospital six days later as a consequence of the horrific injuries inflicted upon him. He was 21 years old.

What was Shepard's "crime"? Quite simply, that he was gay. In the subsequent criminal trial, one of Shepard's murderers attempted to use the so-called "gay panic" defence. This argument - which is now banned in most jurisdictions - essentially says that Shepard made a "pass" at the defendant, who then panicked in the belief that he was about to be sexually importuned, causing him to respond with violence.

The defence was dismissed and the defendants were sentenced to life in prison. The "gay panic" defence is now illegitimate in most jurisdictions precisely because it is predicated on the premise that it is appropriate for a man to respond with violence to an alleged or perceived sexual proposition from another man (yet how many women would get away with that defence in relation to being sexually pestered by a man?) Likewise, the fact that Shepard was tortured over a period of 18 hours demonstrates that what happened to him was not the result of any "panic" but was the expression of a deliberate and brutal hate crime.

In her song, Etheridge laments:

They beat you and they tied you
They left you cold and breathing
For love they crucified you
I can't forget hard as I try
This silhouette against the sky

And in the chorus, adds:

Scarecrow crying
Waiting to die
Wondering why
Scarecrow trying
Angels will hold
Carry your soul away

You don't have to try very hard to see in Matthew Shepard's fate parallels with what Jesus experienced on Good Friday. Over an extended period of time, he was beaten, tortured, vilified, spat on, and subjected to systematic humiliation

and abuse. And what was his "crime"? Telling the world that God loves us, and that we ought accordingly love one another. As Jesus commanded: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart; and love your neighbour as yourself. In this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22: 37-40).

Both the events of Good Friday and the death of Matthew Shepard remind us about the political nature of love, about the "threat" it poses to established conventions of what constitutes "proper" human life - and to those who profit from those conventions. Jesus was executed in a manner so barbarous that it would today be outlawed as a crime against humanity - yet it was done as a deliberate political message to anyone else who thought about destabilising the existing political or religious leadership.

Solidarity is the political name for love. God's solidarity with suffering humanity through the injustice of the Cross calls us into solidarity with the humanity of those who suffer injustice and abuse today. Matthew Shepard stands as a kind of latter-day Crucifix: the brutality and inhumanity of his death - and the reasons why it was inflicted upon him - calls us to oppose bigotry and hatred with love, and with the politics of love. Love is deeply personal; and, as the American feminist Carol Hanisch declared: "The personal is always political."

We might not agree with one another. Indeed, we may strongly disagree with each other, and argue against one another. We may not even like each other at times. But we must always, always, always love one another and stand in solidarity with one another - with our shared humanity, all the other categories and distinctions which we apply to one another notwithstanding. That is the meaning and the power of the tragedy which befell Matthew Shepard - and it is the meaning and the power of Good Friday today.

Worship This Sunday

This Sunday is Easter Sunday and will be a joint service conducted at HUC with our friends and neighbours from Ringwood UCA.. I will be presiding, and worship will commence at 10am. We will also be celebrating Holy Communion.

Remember In Your Prayers

Please remember the following members of our community in your prayers:

- Betty Wallace, who has now returned home after a long stay in hospital
- Pam Woolcock, who is recovering from recent surgery
- Ross Scholes-Robertson, who is in hospital following an injury sustained in a recent fall.

HUC 2024 Directory

The new HUC Directory is now available. Please click this link to download a copy. If you would like a hard copy, please contact Mal McDonald.

Four U News

The next Four U gathering will take place in the Fellowship Room on Monday 8th April at 2pm. Ron Fry from Ringwood Movie Makers will be speaking. For full details please click this link.

HUC Annual Report

For those folk who were not able to attend the AGM last Sunday, attached is a copy of the 2023 HUC Annual Report. To read the report, please click this link.

CPP Presents - Little Women

The CPP will be presenting the stage version of Louisa May Alcott's classic, "Little Women". Performances begin on April 5th, and include a mix of evening, matinee, and early afternoon shows. Full details can be found by clicking this link.

Blessings,

Brendan