

Blood and guts - fortitude. 2 October 2022

I have been reading three books concurrently, which is probably not the most sensible idea, but it does make for some interesting juxtapositions of subject matter.

Actually, I had to put one of them down, as I was trying hard to read the other two in good time, so I could relax with the third and take my time over it.

The first book was, 'Try not to laugh, Sergeant-major', a book about the British Army of the Rhine, written in 1984, when such a force still existed. Mikhail Gorbachev had only just taken over the USSR from Brezhnev, (via Andropov and Chernenko) but the Berlin

Wall still stood, and the Iron Curtain of Stalin separated Eastern Europe from the West.

Although the book has an amusing title and some funny anecdotes, it is primarily a serious book about the training of NATO forces to face the threat of invasion by the USSR.

Now the Berlin Wall is down, and Gorbachev, the orchestrator of the dissolution of the USSR has also recently died, we are left with a different sort of threat from a megalomaniac would-be tsar, who would love to subjugate the whole of Eastern Europe once more beneath the yoke of Russian oppression.

The second book I am reading is as a result of a review in the Anglican newspaper, 'Topic'. It

is called, 'The Primacy of Love', and is, ostensibly, by the author Ilia Delio, but is in reality around 90% quotations from other sources, with little original thought from the purported author.

Its subject matter is supposedly a new theology of God based on quantum physics and interrelational aspects of subatomic particles. It proposes two different forms of energy; one that is measurable (tangential), and one that is not (radial), and for which we can only propose effects. It attempts - unsuccessfully, to square these propositions with the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which, as you know, is all about entropy - and is never mentioned!

To my mind, it is heretical BS, but I have engaged with the author of the review for a number of reasons.

First, that I think he is misguided and off down an imaginary rabbit hole; second, that he is so enamoured of this book and the author that he feels this book '...might change your life' (perhaps it might rather change your choice of reading matter!), and third, because you and I know him - he's David Price, the previous vicar here, and who, I believe, was beginning to confuse you with his bizarre excursions into questionable theology before I even got here.

But Dave remains a friend of mine, and I wrote to him when I had read his review, and told him that I thought he was off the plot. He was kind enough to suggest that I wrote a letter to the editor of the paper in order to stimulate some debate. This I have done, and we shall see what comes of it.

This strange pairing of a most down-to-earth book about the British Army of the the Rhine in 1980's Europe, and an esoteric fantasy masquerading as 'new theology', may seem an odd way into a sermon, but it rather reflects my state of mind over the last ten days or so, when the Covid 'brain fog' has been all too prevalent in my head.

Luke 17 jumps around from its opening verses, from things that cause people to stumble, millstones around the neck for misleading children, mustard seeds and mulberry bushes, servants serving supper, to healing a Samaritan with leprosy, and recognising the day when the Son of Man will reappear.

So given all that in barely 30 verses, I felt justified in throwing out my odd choices of books at you.

I get the impression in Luke 17 that Jesus is just a bit cheesed off with the disciples.

He is using strong, powerful, and unforgiving imagery about the consequences of leading people astray, and then in response to a plea to

'increase our faith', he throws an example at them which can only be regarded as absurd. Matthew 17 has mustard seed faith capable of moving mountains, and Luke 17 has it moving mulberry trees.

I think what Jesus is saying in context of his earlier admonitions about being careful not to lead others astray, is that right now it is not faith that is the issue - it is doing what you are told. Hence, he goes on to tell the story of the servant only doing his duty. The implication to me being that Jesus is asking his disciples to concentrate on doing what he is asking them to do - in other words, to be 'worthy' servants and just get on with the job.

I am reminded of being in the 1st Armoured Field Ambulance in the mountains of Bosnia in the middle of the 1990's, and being surprised by the number of people that were interested in a weekly bible study.

The juxtaposition of our battle-torn environment and the exploration we were making of John's gospel in a tent in a bombed-out factory was weird, to say the least.

It is hard to focus the mind on theological ideas when all around you is the detritus of war and its human casualties - especially the children. But somehow these combat troops wanted to feel the warmth and love of God for their souls in the freezing, mine-ridden,

broken rubble of what had once been a thriving community of mixed races and religions in a pretty mountain village.

As a Field Ambulance, and not a Field Hospital, we had far less equipment than we needed, but by offering what we had to support the locals, whose mountain roads had been destroyed, we formed a bond that produced some good friendships over that winter.

Putting the sublime and ridiculous together is sometimes a wonderful mixture - like Marmite and Marmalade - you Philistines would probably opt for peanut butter and jello - and the result is a bonus of the unexpected.

What was it that Jesus' disciples wanted and were whining for? 'Increase our faith', they were bleating; 'Do your job,' says Jesus.

We had no real idea how to 'increase our faith' in the smell of bandages and canvas, but we could get on with our jobs, which we did - and the prize was the bonding of all of us, traumatized civilians, broken children, and compassionate troops eager to help.

Somehow, although we never really got into any deep discussion in our bible study, the very fact of it **happening** seemed to make a difference to folks in the camp.

Squaddies do not tend to debate at university level - nor would they want to, but they get the message of the gospel just as clearly.

When we got to the point in John 6 where Jesus walks on water, and the question was asked as to why he would have done that, one young soldier with no neck and built like a bulldog, said quick as a flash, 'Well, he had to show them who was Boss, innit?'

I just can't see this lad wasting Jesus' time with 'Increase our faith!' demands. He would have been the one who got on with the job - and he did.

He played with a blind child who had lost his eyes and part of his hands to a small plastic mine he had found in the snow; he helped an old lady with burns to drink a cup of tea; and he gave me a piece of chocolate after one of

the bible studies, with the comment, 'Ere you go Doc.'

That particular soldier was a driver of a huge flat-bed truck that could transport tanks, and one day, going down the remains of the icy mountain roads, his brakes failed and he was injured. He survived and was transported back to Hohne near Belsen in Germany where he was based, but I missed him from our bible study.

He showed a fortitude and resilience and capacity for God's work that Jesus would have jumped at.

Nothing unworthy about that servant, I can assure you.