

From the moment I mastered ‘the big red lorry went up the hill’ I have been a voracious reader. You name it, I would read it; eking out the words with the light under the bedroom door if needs be, if nothing else was available then mentally devouring the back of a cereal packet. I’m still not sure what niacin and riboflavin are but I sure know how to spell them. Forget Saturday morning TV ad breaks, if you really wanted to reach the young mind of the 1970s it was the small print on the Coco Pops box that gave you direct access to the impressionable junior psyche.

One of the thousands of tomes that my eyes have devoured was called *How to be Happy* which, given the evidence of my life before and after doesn’t really live up to the promise of the title, though possibly, I may not have understood what I was reading. There was one piece of advice that I have remembered from that book—and used—and it’s bang on. The suggestion was, if you’re part way through a book and struggling to keep your interest piqued or your motivation going to keep turning the pages, it’s ok to give up. There’s no point plodding on as it’s highly unlikely to get any better. Moby Dick, Leviticus, anything by Jeffrey Archer: why prolong your misery by sticking at it? It may seem obvious to you; it wasn’t to me till *How to be Happy* landed in my mitts. My life hasn’t exactly been transformed— **the glass is still half empty and getting emptier all the time**— but I do now give up on a book that’s not giving it to me without guilt and, again, I don’t know about you, but I certainly can do with less guilt in my life. There are two books, I had given up on before imbibing the self help advice and that was not because they were boring, but because they were too disturbing for me to continue. Given that I’ve read the entire William Burroughs oeuvre apart from the one about cats, this is some feat of discomfit. The first such volume was a book called *The Prophets* a novel set on a slave plantation whose descriptions of racism and homophobia were just too much. The second is the history book *The Rape of Nanking* by Iris Chang. This I had to put to one side because ifs matter-of-fact descriptions of the behaviour of the second world war Japanese army towards the citizens of the Chinese capital are at first almost beyond belief and then quickly too much to bear. Rather like those who seek to deny the Holocaust, or downplay the numbers of gay men the Nazis murdered, this account of the events of the occupation of Nanjing has its detractors; still, if only a tenth of what is described in the first chapters of this book is a true record, those events are an indelible entry in humanity’s catalogue of shame.

I must state here and now that the inhumanity described in *The Rape of Nanking* is not something peculiar to the Imperial Japanese Army. Over in Europe mere months later Nazi Germany was to dedicate years to plumbing the depths of depravity. It’s

not just a foreign thing— they do it over there but they don't do it here— as ample examples of British Imperial inhumanity from the fate of the indigenous people of Tasmania to the torture of the mau mau in Kenya, from the invention of the concentration camp to the *laissez faire* 'free market' disaster of the Great Hunger in Ireland readily attest. And, sadly, it's not a case of 'they did it then, but we don't do it now': times have changed, but everywhere, when humans start fighting it ends in inhumanity.

There are no rules in love and war, and in war there is no love. Even when war is played by the rules, even when war is fought for the best of reasons, even if it is a 'just war' everywhere humans start fighting it ends in inhumanity. Because there is really no other way of killing your siblings.

In every time and every place, across cultures and continents, man's inhumanity to man is undeniable.

Which leaves us with a question. One of the biggest questions. A question that's been asked time and time again for thousands of years. A fundamental question of philosophy, ethics, theology.

As we remember here the events of two world wars today it's a question I think we have to confront, a question we cannot avoid, a question we must ask, a question that victims and witnesses of suffering and evil always ends up asking, and it's this:

Why did God let this happen?

Why does God just sit back and let this happen?

How can a supposedly loving God let this happen?

Why does God let this happen?

I don't know: I would not claim to know the mind of God, and this is a question whose asking has never produced a definitive or satisfactory answer but our attempts to meet the challenge inherent in its asking can deepen our understanding. Which is the best we can hope for, and so it's something worth pursuing.

Why does God let this happen?

It's important from the offset to make it clear that God letting something happen, doesn't mean he wants it to happen: he doesn't do it, or want it, but he lets us do it: he has given us free will, the freedom to act as we will. God lets *us* do it. This is no comfort for those on the receiving end of human evil, but it does show us that this is not so much about God as about *us*, specifically how we are exercising the free will God has gifted to us. In the beginning we were created with the ability to choose. And straight away to chose our own downfall. We chose the path of disobedience, and suffered the consequences.

If there is no free will then God is like a child playing with dolls and we are nothing more than lifeless marionettes; lifeless marionettes do not suffer, but nor do they live. At times of great suffering we may think that if we could forgo suffering in exchange for free will we would, but Calvary tells us such a bargain is not part of the plan. Whatever it is, we have to work it out for ourselves. With free will comes responsibility: for ourselves, and for each other. That's the bit we often forget: giddy on our own freedom we reach repeatedly for the forbidden fruit heedless of the consequences for ourselves and for everyone else.

We have free will. We get to choose. That's not God's neglect, not his lack of concern, it's his trust. Trust that we will eventually choose the right way, choose to turn to him.

It is possible to choose that way. In Jesus we are shown a person fully alive in his humanity and fully obedient to God's intention for humanity; a human like us but whose choice was always to turn to God. And in Jesus's humiliating and terrifying death at the hands of his siblings we are shown the transformative love of God, remaking the cruelty and inhumanity of Calvary into the ultimate good of the resurrection. We can choose Good Friday. We usually do. But we can choose Easter. We can.

Having free will means we have done and will continue to do terrible things. But it also means we can do the right things, we can choose to cooperate, to build up, to forgive, to support, to nurture, to shield, to care, to heal, to love.

At Remembrance we consciously and deliberately remember some of the most terrible things, the most evil things humanity has done. At the same time we remember those who did the right thing: those who stood up against evil despite the

cost to themselves, those who sacrificed themselves for the good of others, those who suffered and died so that others might live.

The first part of this is hard. It is not easy to look on the things we have done. We desperately want to close the book, to stop reading of the atrocities; we can be tempted to ignore the horror and make it all a tale of heroism and courage and victory. But of course it is both, horror and honour. More, though, Remembrance cannot be simply a case of looking back. If we never lift our eyes from the past we will never learn how to apply its lessons in the present, if we determine to wallow in the past, we will keep repeating it. So Remembrance must also be a determination on our part to work towards a world where the horrors and evils of two world wars will never happen again. Remembrance must fix firm in our hearts and our wills our determination to build a future where we wield our God-given freedom for the good of ourselves and each other;

A world where we recognise in each other not only our common humanity but that we are siblings, all children of the one heavenly Father;

A world where we take arms to fight not our siblings but injustice and cruelty, inhumanity and greed, poverty and prejudice.

We could choose Good Friday. God will allow us and we usually do.

But we can choose Easter.

We can.