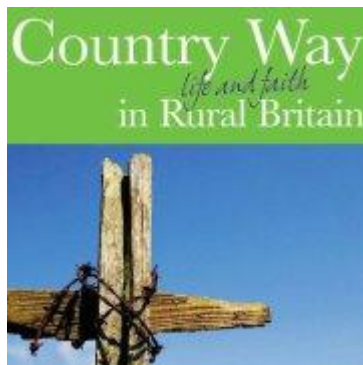


Links and Suggestions 20th April -27th April 2012

Publications

Country Way: life & faith in Rural Britain



- Latest issue of Country Way (No. 60) just about to go to the printers. The theme this time is Faithfulness.

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Thoughts

Perhaps I am stronger than I think.
Perhaps I am even afraid of my strength, and turn it against myself, thus making myself weak.
Making myself secure. Making myself guilty.
Perhaps I am most afraid of the strength of God in me.
Perhaps I would rather be guilty and weak in myself,
than strong in Him whom I cannot understand.

Thomas Merton (from Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours)

"Always consult, and you will never regret your decisions" (Rule of St Benedict 3.13)

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Articles

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17862293>

Brian Draper

Viewpoint: Why did Claire Squires' marathon death strike such a chord?



The death of Claire Squires less than a mile from the finish of the London Marathon has prompted people to donate £1m to charity. Why are people so moved, asks Brian Draper.

Many of us know someone who has run a marathon for charity, and quite a few in the UK will know someone who ran this year's London Marathon.

My brother Kevin was running, to raise money for CRY - Cardiac Risk in the Young - which screens young people for the kind of heart conditions that cause them to die suddenly, shockingly.

He ran in memory of Shannon, a promising teenage triathlete who had collapsed and died last year after a race. Tragically, it happens.

Even if you didn't know someone connected with the marathon, it might be that you saw the event on TV, and caught sight of that famous sea of runners, rippling out.

Claire Squires, front, was raising money for Samaritans

The scene always brings a lump to my throat, and makes me want to jump in, to be a part of it all - precisely because I know that most people are either pushing themselves to their limit for a great cause, or (most movingly) running in memory of someone they have loved and lost.

It's a modern-day ritual, then, which seems to bring out the best in us, in a way that's rarely writ so large in our culture. It's both carnival, and spiritual - a reminder that despite our problems, we humans are capable of great goodness, even if we can't run 26 miles ourselves, we can celebrate and support someone who's willing to have a try.

Claire Squires was having a try, supporting the Samaritans and running in memory of her brother who died 10 years ago. In a sense, then, her story is a distilled essence of the whole - it's just as ordinary, and just as extraordinary, as everyone else's.

This is not, though, a minor "Diana" moment. The marathon is about the everyday stories of sacrifice, perseverance and love that inspire us personally, and help us to feel proud of everyone running, regardless of whether we know them or not.



- Brian Draper is a lecturer at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity
- He is a contributor to BBC Radio 4's Thought for the Day programme

I'm proud of Claire Squires, just as I'm proud of Tim from two doors down, who I know worked incredibly hard to get round in a good time, and who raised his fair share for a cancer charity along the way.

Tim came home, sore, and inspired. Claire didn't. This doesn't make Claire worthy of veneration.

But the fact that she did die, trying - just yards from the line - touches most of us, quite reasonably, at a deeper level, and prompts us to respond, somehow, who knows how? But since it's easy to find Claire's charity page online, it's surely not a sin to donate, nor is it entirely remarkable that so many have done so.

On the other hand, giving money doesn't make us a saint, either. Our responses are neither "right" nor "wrong", but human. And so, I expect those who have given money have benefited themselves from the after-glow that accompanies any act of altruism (including running a marathon) - and from fulfilling our natural desire to play our part, however small, in the wider human story, which Claire's now so vividly represents.

I hate to say it, but a few pounds donated to her JustGiving page does buy you a stake in that story. You can add your name to the drama that began to be written on 10 April, when the first person clicked to donate ("Good luck... Love you xx"), and where you can read a friend's pre-race encouragement: "Go! Go! Go! We are on our way to see you at the finishing line!"

Claire's story, perhaps most poignantly and selfishly, reminds us, lest we forget, that it could have been you, and it could have been me. For if a young, seemingly fit woman can be here one moment, and gone the next, then so can we.

So perhaps ultimately, then, each small donation, which adds up to such a great sum, is both selfish and selfless - a ritual act of remembrance, which anyone can take part in, for our secular times, a bit like walking into a church and lighting a candle.

It won't bring back the dead, but it will shine a light for them. It will also say that you care, that you know life is fragile, and that every breath is precious, since it may be your last.

I had a place for the marathon too, running for Christian Aid - but I had to pull out beforehand through injury. There but for the grace of God go I, and go we.

But I'll keep running. Because next year, I'd love to jump into that great sea of humanity myself, to play my part.

And part of me, no doubt, will run for Claire.

Blogs

<http://jbyas.com/2012/04/23/making-disciples-through-story/>

Making Disciples Through Story

Posted on April 23, 2012 by jbyas

There is a reason the Bible is a story. Even though it might embarrass us to admit it in this scientific age, we are a storied species. Our identity is simply the story we tell ourselves about our place in the world. We have constructed an incredibly intricate narrative that tells us who we are, what we are doing, who the people are that we are doing it with, and why it all matters.

Over the years I have decided that a large part of discipleship is learning to see all of these stories we are told and tell about ourselves through an ever-growing lens of the story of Jesus and the story God tells about us. And as a Christian, I believe that the dominant stories in our culture are opposed to the Gospel, they are stories of propaganda that enslave us rather than set us free. They are stories that disciples of Jesus need to be freed from and that freed disciples need to help free others from.

The Dominant Secular Story Walter Brueggemann has, rightly, I think, named the dominant story of our culture as technological, therapeutic, consumer militarism. To deny that you live within this story is to be completely enslaved to it. Even once we are aware of it, it is a daunting task to overcome. Through advertising, ideology, and propaganda, we are told that advances in technology means “things are getting better,” that we are safe, and that our consumption of technology will make us happy. Our therapy is purchase. Our identity is in stuff.

It is obvious that this story is what props up our economy. But it is just as obvious that this story is an utter failure. Americans are statistically some of the unhappiest people on the planet. But since we do not have an alternative story, we must ignore its failure. And to do so, we have become the most medicated and entertainment-obsessed culture in the world. This does not sound like a story of freedom but a story of enslavement and oppression.

The Dominant Religious Story Christian Smith has termed the dominant story in religious culture as moralistic therapeutic deism. This is perhaps the most disappointing story to recognize. It has slithered into our Christian consciousness like the serpent in the Garden. In the guise of selfless language, our religion has become one of self-centeredness. In this story God is the great Psychiatrist who heals our low self-esteem and the Bible is great Book of Self-Help, one that details how to be a “good person” and how to get along in the world. This story might free us from the fear of death or the reality of uncertainties, but it certainly does not free me from myself or my own oppressive ideologies.

How do we overcome these stories and replace them with more biblical trajectories for our lives? Well, we have a lot of work to do. But the most important, without a doubt, is The Church. Unless we come together to confront the dominant stories, we cannot succeed. If we think we can overcome the powerful forces of advertising, money, and politics on our own, as lone ranger Christians (it's just me and Jesus), we are greatly deceived.

Unfortunately, many institutional versions of the local church today are simply not in a place to confront these narratives. In fact, they often participate in them with full force, often being the biggest evangelist for both of these stories. But I know the Spirit of God is at work as more people recognize we must come together to tell ourselves a new story.

It is through repeated, patient, and subversive storytelling within our safe Christian communities that our identities can be deconstructed. We must combat story with story, narrative with narrative. We cannot will ourselves out of the dominant stories of our culture, we must submit to new stories. And these new stories must be told to us again and again. They must be discussed within our families, debated within small groups, grappled with in Sunday schools, and preached vigorously from the pulpit.

It is also through learning new rhythms of life, allowing these new stories to determine the details of our lives, specifically: where we live, why we live there, where we work, why we work there, what we purchase, why we purchase it, what we eat, why we eat it, who we live with, why we live with them, what we strive for, why we strive for it, etc etc etc . . .

I do not find discipleship in showing up to a building once a week. I do not find it in abstract ideas. I do not find it in overlaying religious language and “practical application points” onto the unquestioned systems of my life. I find it in this continual process of unlearning stories/replacing stories/unlearning rhythms/replacing rhythms.

And as we, the people of God, find ourselves living out new stories, we will find that all our work was not for ourselves. It was to find an alternative to the dominant story for the rest of our culture. When we emerge from all our hard work we might just find that we have become a city on a hill, a light to the nation.

Images



Willem Zijlstra: Agnus Dei