

# Facing Tigers

Sermon by Stephen Crowther, Sunday 12 January 2020

I often think of Hyacinth Bucket and the exhausting pursuit of Keeping Up Appearances. ‘What would the neighbours say?’ was a familiar refrain when I was growing up. I suspect this may be familiar to others. I’m not interested in blaming anyone for this – but only in how worrying about what others think of us, plays out in our lives – how it can impact the way we show up for one another in the world. Because, if I’m keeping parts of myself hidden from fear of what you might think of me and you’re keeping parts of yourself hidden for the same reason, then we do not truly meet each other. Fear of what others might think of us can inhibit us from becoming our true selves. How can we encounter God in each other when we are trying to connect from false bases - where we are controlled by fear? For myself, this fear of disclosure betrays my own experience of God’s love for me, just as I am. I struggle to let this Love in at times, believing myself not worthy or deserving of it. And yet, in doing so, it seems that I am saying what is or is not acceptable or pleasing to God - that in allowing others’ opinions of me to control me, I am placing them above God’s unconditional love and acceptance. And I find myself thinking – *‘how dare I?’!*

And of course, in preparing this sermon, I notice an anxiety in telling my story - wondering how it will be received. Padraig O’Tuama says that telling our stories is *‘the work of the kitchen table’*. And Stefan Molyneaux has written: *‘Be vulnerable. Be honest. Be open and show your heart. That’s the best way of telling your heart that the tigers are no longer in the grass.’*

But, let there be no mistake - it can take enormous courage to face the tigers in the grass and tell our story.

In 1984 while living in Manchester and at a particularly dark time in my life, I found myself thinking that the only way out of my pain was to commit suicide. I managed to convince myself that I would be doing the world a favour. For I had grown up with a sense of being deeply flawed – that there was something fundamentally wrong with me; a belief that was confirmed by decisions and choices I made.

And so, without understanding the consequences that such an act might have on those who loved me, one day, I checked into a hotel where my friend Stuart worked and took an overdose in my room. When I awoke in hospital a day or two later, I was furious having failed yet again.

One day, 20 years later, I was walking along Brighton seafront where I was then living, when I noticed a man walking toward me. He looked familiar. He looked a bit like Stuart – it was him.

And so, I heard the story of what happened. Unable to get a response and suspecting something was wrong, he broke the door down and called an ambulance. At the time I would not have been grateful, but standing there that morning by the sea, I was able wholeheartedly, to thank him for what he did.

I tell my story because it may also be part of your story and so you might find yourself going 'me too'. And I tell it because I have a bad memory and can forget where I've been - sometimes I need reminding. And, of course, where I have been has brought me to where I am. So, in telling my story, I offer hope and I offer evidence of God's mercy and grace at work in my life.

For, I believe that it is by God's grace that I am even here to do the telling. It was God's grace that brought Stuart and I together on the beach that day. Grace has spared me when so many friends have died along the way. It is Grace that has touched me and changed me into the person I am becoming - the person I was always meant to be but didn't know it. It is Grace that has moulded qualities in me that prompt others to invite me to conduct weddings, namings, funerals and to stand here this morning - I am entrusted with this honour. It is Grace that brought me into relationship with my partner where we know that God has gifted us each other when we had both given up on romantic Love. It is by Grace alone, not my doing.... *amazing grace*

I wonder - if you were to look back across your life, would you see times when God's grace was at work? When you were 'called...out of darkness into His marvellous light'?