

Observing Violence

David Masters

Only once at university did I feel a twinge of regret for failing to read the required text. We were studying the military dictatorship that marred Brazil in the 1960s and 70s. The reading was from 'Nunca Mais', Never Again, the stories of victims tortured in those decades. I hadn't bothered to search out the text in the library, so I had no idea what the reading was about until I got to class. It was a chapter from the book documenting, in exact detail, torture techniques used by the regime.

I listened to my classmates summarise the reading to our teacher. They talked about the parrot perch, the little pepper, and the dragon's chair. My classmates respected the conventions and taboos of an academic classroom, and assumed everyone else knew what they were talking about. I respected these same taboos and didn't ask any questions. As they summarised the reading, my classmates left the graphic details in the text. Blood doesn't go down well in a classroom. It stains the carpet, worse than spilled coffee. I left class curious, and looked up the reading later, guiltily, as though searching for the secrets of power. I was fascinated by the worst things human beings can do to one another.

Violence is fascinating. It demands attention, and attention is easily given. Simply watch the evening news; look where the television cameras turn their gaze. Death and violence shout from the screen. Catholic priest Henri Nouwen puts it this way: 'Death is always glamorous. Death shines; it is always big and noisy. Death goes bang, bang!'¹

During my time as a student, I spent a year studying the Bible at a Christian college. Before lectures each morning was a student-led devotion. Some students chose to greet the new day with worship songs; others led a Bible study. Sometimes we were sent out on a walk to enjoy the morning sunshine. Some people chose to share their testimony, the story of their life with God.

One morning we'd all gathered as usual in the lecture hall. The student leading the devotion simply stood in front of us, crying. Red eyes, tears streaming down her face, sobbing. Slowly, with stuttering words, she told the story of how as a teenager she'd been raped by a friend she trusted. Ever since she'd felt dirty, unworthy to be a child of God. That was a day we all listened with our full attention.

Another story. Blockbuster novelist Steig Larsson spent his adolescence in a shroud of guilt. At age fifteen he failed to intervene as his friends gang raped a girl. He simply watched, helpless. His self-disgust at his inaction inspired him in later life to write *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, a best selling mystery novel that confronts and exposes male brutality. Each section of the book is prefaced with statistics on male violence. Lisbeth Salandar, Larsson's heroine detective, is herself subjected to brutal sexual torture at the hands of a man appointed to protect her. Larsson shows no timidity in his rape scenes. Salander is spared no

¹ H Nouwen, *Be with Me, Lord: Prayers and reflections for the Advent season*, Creative Communications for the Parish, St. Louis, 1998, pp. 5-6.

Mozaik 26, *Stop Being Silent!*, "Observing Violence", David Masters, 2010.

Subscribe to Mozaik by visiting www.wscf-europe.org/resources/mozaik/subscribe/

mercy and neither is the reader. Salander's rape is described in harrowing detail. One reviewer goes so far as to denounce Larsson's work as 'verging on pornographic'. Yet part of the appeal of Larsson's books is the grotesque violence. It lures the reader into a dark world. The violence is enticing, it holds you, you want to read more.

This voyeurism – looking on an act of sexual torture and humiliation – lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Without shame we can gaze upon a man's naked body, hung on a wooden beam, broken, bruised, and bloody by the worst things human beings know how to do to one another.

As a Christian, it's difficult to understand why an image of torture lies at the heart of our faith. Why would a God of love allow such a thing to happen? Why does God allow such things to happen every day?

To cover our eyes from the questions, the blood has been cleaned from the crucifix so it will not stain church carpets. At the same time, Cathedral gift shops, Christian bookshops and high street jewellery shops all cash in on selling crucifixes, a graven image of a tortured, anguished, dying peasant.

Some Christians attempt to face up to the difficult questions. Wrestling with their faith as Jacob wrestled with God, some find themselves blaming the Christ, who willingly accepted his sufferings on the cross, for perpetuating violence, for being an inspiration for violence, or – perhaps worse – for being an inspiration for choosing the role of victim. They're not wrong. Lucia tells the story of her husband.

*Mostly he is a good man. But sometimes he becomes very angry and he hits me. He knocks me down. One time he broke my arm and I had to go to the hospital. I went to my priest twenty years ago. I've been trying to follow his advice. The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, 'If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.'*²

Still others claim that through Christ's death on the cross the sheer brutality and meaningless of violence was exposed, unveiled for all to see. Death and violence lose their sting. James Alison argues that in the torture, murder, and resurrection of Christ:

the whole mechanism by which death retains people in its thrall had been shown to be unnecessary. Whatever death is, it is not something which has to structure every human life from within (as in fact it does), but rather it is an empty shell, a bark without a bite. ³

Like the theologians who grapple with Christ's death, I never understood why my student friend at Bible college told her story of being raped. Yet to this day I remember the story and

² RN Brock and RA Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, redemptive suffering, and the search for what saves us*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2001, p. 21.

³ J Alison, *Living in the End Times*, SPCK Publishing, p. 29.

Mozaik 26, *Stop Being Silent!*, "Observing Violence", David Masters, 2010.

Subscribe to Mozaik by visiting www.wscf-europe.org/resources/mozaik/subscribe/

my thoughts and feelings as she told it. Perhaps it's an attempt to let go, I thought. I also remember feeling helpless. What am I supposed to do about this, I wondered selfishly. Why have you left me with this?

Did the disciples feel this way as they sat in a locked room after Jesus' crucifixion? They'd seen their leader humiliated, stripped naked, spat in the face, mocked, and whipped. They'd felt the cruel fascination as they watched the nails driven through his hands, as they heard the bone splinter; they'd felt a silent relief that this was someone else. Their hands and bodies are still intact. Only their sleep is broken; their dreams are harrowing. You can see it in their bloodshot eyes. What are we supposed to do with this, they wonder. Why have you left us with this?

Can looking on violence ever be a good thing? Can it be a redemptive experience? More crudely, can I find healing in someone else's suffering, suffering that I did not cause but that fascinates me to watch or read about?

I don't think there's a simple answer to this question. It's a messy question, tinged with all the ambiguities of being human. Looking upon violence can be simultaneously fascinating and repulsive. It can be inspiration for action. It can be met with indifference or apathy. Watching violence can leave you boiling inside with anger: I hate that this happens, but what can I do about it?

How much grace should we extend to ourselves in watching violence until we say, no, this is enough, I need to do something?

Those who speak out against violence do so in faith, hope, and love. Faith in humanity, that people are capable of change, and that telling stories of violence can bring about change. Hope that change is possible. And love for all people that creates the desire for a better world.

Violence is definite and definitive; it sets clear boundaries, black and white, right and wrong. Yet peace exists in the borderline, in the cracks in between, in paradox. And here sit the stories of violence: in the borderline between fascination and repulsion, between voyeurism and genuine concern. These cracks of peace are the places people brave enough to share their story – and those with the courage to challenge violence – choose to inhabit.

David Masters is the Regional Secretary of WSCF Europe. He studied theology at Manchester University and reconciliation at the Irish School of Ecumenics.