

Good Friday.

One of the things I enjoy the most about living in Harrogate is walking my dog across the stray each morning. When I first arrived here six years ago the cherry trees were in full blossom. As I walked under that tunnel of blossom every day I thought I was in heaven. The trees were planted to mark the Queen's coronation, and now, over fifty years later, some of them have died. Their places have been taken by young saplings. If it is very heaven to walk under that glorious cherry blossom shade each morning, there are days when you think you are in hell. I turn the corner from the Leeds Road on to the Stray, and there I see sapling after sapling ripped to pieces. You see the smashed beer bottles nearby, and you can just imagine the animal savagery as a group of vandals danced in ecstasy as they pulled off branch after branch.

I've seen it happen so many times now. Some of the saplings are now the fourth attempt. My hearts sinks when I see the devastation yet again. One day I came across a woman crying her eyes out. On another occasion another woman told me that one of the trees had just been given in memory of her late partner.

Every time it happens I am stunned. Each time I try to make some sort of sense of it all. I ask myself if it is really that important; after all, they're only trees. Are we not in danger of getting a bit sentimental? I have to warn myself not to go over the top, but I can't help seeing it as a terrible assault on beauty. The fact is that there is real beauty in this world and real ugliness. There is so much

goodness, and so much evil, and we deceive ourselves in our modern, reductionist, scientific world when we dismiss evil as an outdated, crude explanation of certain events.

OK, trees are trees. But every time I see this outrage on something so lovely, I think of what they did to Jesus on Good Friday. Here was the loveliest human being who ever lived. In him was no sin, no evil. He went about doing good, helping others, healing the sick, bringing new hope to those who had given up. He was light to those in darkness. He told people of God's unconditional love. He went out of his way to meet the forgotten, despised, and lowly. He wanted people to know that God was real, powerfully at work among them. As he brought sight to the blind, walking to the disabled, life to the dead, Jesus wanted people to see God's power in their midst. Jesus had no hidden agenda. He wasn't on the make. He wanted nothing for himself. It was all giving, giving of himself out of love.

What a beautiful man! And how did they respond to him? They crucified him on a Cross. They couldn't welcome him and return his love. They had to torture him and kill him. Perhaps you think I'm going over the top, but I see the vandals' gratuitous destruction of those lovely cherry saplings on our Stray, and the vicious murder of Jesus as all of a piece.

What is it in us that makes us want to destroy everything that is lovely? Who knows? It's easy to dismiss the vandals on the Stray as yobs. But what possesses so-called responsible people to use their newspapers to want to make Gerry and Kate McCann suffer even more by saying day after day, without a shred of proof, that they murdered their own daughter? Of

course, such sensationalist lies make money, but I think it is more than that. It is just pure and utter viciousness.

One of the most vicious episodes in our history was, of course, the Nazi holocaust, the deliberate and calculated plan to wipe out all Jews, Slavs, homosexuals, disabled, and gypsies. Adolf Eichmann was the architect. His job was to manage the logistics of mass deportation to the concentration camps in eastern Europe. After the war Eichmann fled to Argentina, but eventually Israeli Mossad agents tracked him down and flew him to Israel where he was put on trial in 1961.

The Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt, watched him in the dock. Here at last, they were face to face with the monster who arranged this mass destruction of their people. Hannah Arendt was shocked at her reaction to him. Here she was, gazing at pure evil, and yet, and yet, he looked so ... so *normal*! She wrote an essay about all this, one of the best anatomies of evil ever produced, and its title gave the world a haunting new phrase. She called her essay, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. As she looked at this evil man, he just looked so banal, so ... *ordinary*. The banality of evil.

When I see those saplings ripped to pieces, I want to have a good look at the little devils who did it. What sort of beings could *do* such a thing? But you know, if I *did* see them, they would just look *normal*, and my rage would probably just evaporate. I'm pretty sure that Caiaphas the High Priest who was so mad to have Jesus put to death, would have looked *ordinary*. So would Pontius Pilate.

When Hannah Arendt spoke so penetratingly of the *banality* of evil, she was making the point that evil people are not always fanatics and psychopaths. They're *ordinary*. Eichmann said he was just doing his job. And that's the really scary bit: that terrible, terrible evil is done by ordinary people who just want to obey orders and conform to mass opinion without thinking too much about the consequences.

Such was Adolf Eichmann. Such were Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas and his frightfully respectable clerical colleagues.

Evil is real. It's not just in the nutters and fanatics. It's in the hearts of *all* of us, ordinary people. And life is about the fundamental struggle between good and evil. Some days, it is manifested in the casual destruction of trees on the Stray, or the kicking to death of a man trying to protect his property and family.

It doesn't make sense to us, but they did the same to Jesus, the purest man who ever walked this earth, the very Son of God himself. On Good Friday, God himself entered into this daily struggle between good and evil, and, on that terrible Cross, took on the very worst that lurks in the hearts of *all* of us, even the most ordinary. In his own body he took on the worst that evil could throw at him, and returned love for evil. 'Father, forgive them,' he prayed, 'for they know not what they do'. God knows that the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. At Golgotha God was there in Christ, and as respectable, responsible, ordinary, banal men threw at Jesus the worst the human heart could muster, Jesus *healed* the human heart by answering with love.