David Kettle reflects on

Victimhood, tragedy and spirituality in contemporary western culture

Victimhood is a source of intense feeling in western cultures today, both for those who have themselves experienced being victims and others who identify with victims – victims of prejudice and injustice, of physical and verbal abuse, of crime, misfortune, tragedy and disease. There seems a heightened sensitivity or vulnerability to "victimhood" in our culture today than in the past. This is a matter of spiritual significance which invites a discerning response from any who would stand with Jesus Christ among those who feel themselves to be, or who identify passionately with, victims.

What indications are there of the spiritual and religious significance of "victimhood" today? Four invite mention:

1. We see mass outpourings of feeling, expressed in "religious" ritual, towards certain high-profile iconic victims. The tragic death of the Princess of Wales, famously, brought a great flood of candles and flowers and impromptu monuments in Britain. More recently such an outpouring followed the murder of two young English schoolgirls: over 15,000 candles were lit by visitors to Soham Parish Church, a similar number of letters were sent and flowers placed in the churchyard, and around 2,000 teddy bears given. One might also recall candlelight marches in memory of Aids victims (if we ponder why those remembered were victims of Aids rather than, for example, of cancer, perhaps we may understand more of the implicit intention in such acts of memorial?).

2. "Victim" status plays a religious role sometimes defining the very *identity* of a group which has suffered oppression. The view is held by some today that to be a woman, or to be of a particular race, is to be a victim. It is part of one's identity. We might reflect here how the holocaust has affected Jewish self-under-standing.

In a low-key way, does not even the "whinging pom" express a low, grumbling complaint of victimhood? And then we might ask what place tragedy has in kiwi spirituality. When my family and I moved to New Zealand in 1991 I was struck by the continuing strength of observance of Anzac Day compared to that of Remembrance Day in England. Prominent among the memories preserved on that day was the tragic death of many soldiers at Gallipoli. Then there were the crosses and personal memorials at the site of road traffic accidents – a new sight to me, although interestingly these are increasingly common in England today. Later I noticed the status

given, when the history of New Zealand was taught in primary schools, to three tragedies: the Napier earthquake, the sinking of the Wahine and the Tangiwai train disaster. Kiwi identity seemed to have become interwoven with these "defining" tragedies. Looking behind this one might ask whether migration across the globe to New Zealand has created a culture marked not only by self-reliant, pioneering pragmatism but also by a sense of loss and tragic sensibility?

3. Rights are sometimes exalted to religious status in western culture today, and their violation a religious offence. What has been violated is a matter of absolute entitlement, standing above all challenge and overriding all other considerations. It is effectively sacred. Such feelings of absolute entitlement are further encouraged when the legal profession is allowed to promote litigation in order to secure custom (a marketing practice which nonetheless causes moral dis-ease, I find, among many people in Britain today). They also profoundly shape, in so-called "compensation syndrome", the self-understanding of those pursuing litigation. In such ways the "religion" of rights may, like any religion, become exploited for sheer personal gain.

4. A corollary of these phenomena lies in what is called the "western guilt complex", and also in

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the prevalence of low self-esteem among males. Here the stereotype is carried (heavy burden) of an irredeemable oppressor. Vicarious acts of apology for ancestral sins – acts which no doubt may be pursued with integrity to constructive purpose – may nonetheless prove powerless to exorcise this burden. Neurotic guilt is also widely fostered by the ever-spreading threat of litigation: all of us are growing more vulnerable here, in a distant echo of the vulnerability of citizens under legislative powers in Stalin's Russia.[1] This threat of litigation is responsible today for erosions of freedom in Britain which, a few decades ago, few apart from George Orwell would have thought conceivable: here and there trees with "poisonous" berries are being chopped down and Womens' Institutes are turning away from selling home-made jams.

Now to document in this way the sense of victimhood may seen mildly offensive inasmuch as it silently passes over that which first and foremost morally commands our attention: isn't it our first responsibility to *do something about victims* – not to analyse their experience? Surely we must first attend to the actual oppression or tragedy which gives rise to the experience of victimhood in the first place, and our moral responsibility to put this right in any way possible?

It is the case, I suggest, that this protest reminds us further of the religious significance of victimhood. It parallels the protest we raise as Christians when our culture is prepared only to talk about "spiritual experience" or "ideas of God" while maintaining a determined silence on that which commands our first attention – God's actual appeal to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But let me clarify my intentions in this matter. By exploring the sense or experience of victimhood I mean to explore not less but more

than the actual circumstances which cause victims. I mean to go *beyond* consideration of these circumstances in themselves (which events do after all, at least in some cases, receive wide attention – rhetorically at least – in western culture) to their effect upon victims. I mean to ask *how are these circumstances experienced in terms of victimhood*, by victims themselves or by others who identify with them? What, if you like, is the spiritual power of such circumstances over victims? What responses, what ways of experiencing these circumstances, are possible?

Two further clarifications are required at this point. Firstly, when I write of possible "ways of experiencing victimhood", it should be clear that I intend a wider use of "victimhood" than when a person speaks of "refusing to be a victim". In my use of "victimhood", such a refusal would be described as a refusal to experience victimhood *in a particular way* which we shall explore below.

Secondly, the sense of victimhood in view here may be felt by those who identify with victims although the latter themselves have no awareness of victimhood. Thus a sense of victimhood is widely felt today not only on behalf of people but also of dolphins and rainforests. It seems to me that this feeling for the victim is often today so identical with the feeling of *being* a victim that we may reasonably treat them together as I do in this article. This is not to deny that there are properly differences between the two, especially in their moral aspect: thus I may rightly risk incurring an event which will make me a victim in order to save someone else from becoming such a victim. There are issues here regarding the nature of "identification" and moral responsibility which need further analysis.

Victimhood and tragedy
How shall we describe the feeling associated with victimhood? It would appear to involve both a sense of *injustice* and of the *tragic*. We attribute victimhood not only to

victims of oppression – to those who have suffered bitter injustice at the hands of *fellow human beings* – but also to those who have suffered *tragic misfortune* as a result of *"natural"* (i.e. non-human) causes. The "victim of tragedy" is of course a figure familiar beyond our own culture and age and another indication of the spiritual significance of victimhood.

It is of the essence that a victim is innocent of responsibility for their suffering: they are not "to blame" either in a moral sense (which might make us regard their suffering as just rather than unjust) or in a practical sense (which would make us regard their suffering as a natural consequence of their actions).

By "a sense of the tragic" I mean here that particular sense relating to Greek dramatic tragedy and which finds echo more when we speak of a tragic *person*, a tragic *tale*, or a tragic *image* than in popular references to a tragic event. The tragic, in this core sense, is barely amenable to abstract description; it is most truly presented in the singular. We might think therefore of a tragic victim: the Balkan woman whose baby was taken from her by soldiers, and then found herself given back, mockingly, the head of her baby to suckle at her breast. Yes, a sense of being mocked is part of the experience of victimhood – whether by unfeeling human beings, or by blind chance.

We are profoundly tested spiritually by the experience of, or by close engagement with, victimhood. And we may respond in one of three basic ways, which *constitute how we experience victimhood in the first place*. In the first place we may dismiss it; in the second place we may be overwhelmed emotionally and defeated by it; in the third place we may embrace it in a personally demanding way. The first and second responses are evasive and destructive; the third is responsive and constructive. Let us consider each in turn.

In the first place we may turn away from victimhood when it confronts us. We may treat it dismissively, denying the personal,

moral and spiritual challenge it presents to us. This challenge is at once to take any responsible action possible to spare or relieve victimhood, and to grieve without despairing where we are powerless to put right what is grievously wrong. Such dismissal of course perpetuates and reinforces the circumstance – the oppression or misfortune – which is the occasion of victimhood. Our denial may find release in laughter, in that dissociated "laughing at" which is so different from "laughing with", and which finds calculated expression in mockery. I wonder sometimes about Red Nose Day: if we have to acknowledge victims, let's keep them at a safe distance: is that what we're saying?

In the second place, we may respond by being emotionally overwhelmed. We may be crushed, emotionally shredded and devastated by something beyond all facing. Now it may seem unreasonable that this should be called a response, when it is surely something which happens to us despite ourselves. In reality, however, there is surely an act of submission involved here; this is a *way of experiencing* victimhood in terms of defeat, in which we yield to *defining ourselves by our being negated as persons*. Our anguish may then settle into the emotional paralysis of self-pity for ourselves or for those whom we see as "pitiful"; alternatively it may find expression in passionate rage. A bitter sense of victimhood has led to many an outrageous act. You may recall that a man was so outraged at the effects of poison drops upon wildlife in the New Zealand bush in the 1990's that he attempted the armed hijack of a commercial helicopter. In the United States, individuals outraged at the victimisation of unborn children have performed acts of extreme violence against Abortion Clinic staff, while in Britain individuals

outraged at the victimisation of animals in research laboratories have sent letter-bombs to those they hold responsible.

How shall we describe such feelings of outrage? Are they moral indignation? Interestingly it has been said of our culture that as well as being amoral or relativistic in its morality, it is marked by moral perfectionism giving free reign to "moral passions"[2]. Our culture is marked *both* by moral relativism *and* by moral absolutism – and arguably by a tendency of polarisation between them. At the pole of moral passion lies, among other pheno-mena, the outrage which is felt by or on behalf of a victim. The moral character of this feeling is unquali-fied deference before that which, violated and powerless as we behold it, pleads compellingly to be upheld.

But are these passions adequately described as moral? Surely moral

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feeling is associated with an intention to recognise and integrate, in a single act of judgement, all moral considerations? By contrast, here we see passion overriding any such judgement, and sometimes doing so with extreme violence. Exaltation of these "moral passions" may distort true moral life just as seriously as does the tendency of moral relativism.

Victimhood and sacrifice
Such exaltation may be described, I suggest, in religious terms. What has been violated has been elevated to the status of the *sacred*. And its violation evokes a clamour for *sacrifice*.

The sacred gets constructed here in two different ways, in each case becoming the occasion of rage when violated. In the first case, we invest sacred status sometimes in idealised institutions, or individuals, or places,

or beliefs, or practices, and we believe – implicitly, if not explicitly – that our own well-being depends utterly upon these sacred things being honoured. Accordingly, if these are violated, we see ourselves under radical threat and respond with rage, and are liable to persecute offenders. The most obvious examples of this are found in pre-modern religions; however, the violation of ideological (e.g. "politically correct") norms in modern institutions can provoke comparable reactions.[3]

In the second case, we make ourselves as individuals the sacred centre of our world which we see merely as an extension of ourselves. Such narcissism is fostered in modern cultures when we experience living from our earliest years in a society which seriously ignores, excludes or abandons us as unique persons. Our basic hope and trust breaks down and, turning inward, we lose our sense of responsibility to a world beyond us; we see ourselves as inalienably innocent and possessed of entitlements. The only alternative to this which we can envisage is our utter exclusion and alienation. When the truth presses upon us that we are contingent in our existence and our moral standing, and vulnerable to violation by a world which shows a stubborn resistance to our sacred will, we find this a blasphemy which elicits our rage.

At first sight it would seem that narcissism relates only to the sense of *being* a victim, and not to feeling *for others* as victims. However, others can become incorporated into our self-preoccupation. Rowan Williams, who acknowledges the risk of the "exalted sentimentality of identifying with victims", writes:

if we simply said that someone else's loss "became" mine, we should be abolishing the distance between me and the other; recognition in the other would collapse into absorption, and we should be left

only with melancholy, in which all pain or tragedy is defined in terms of my sense of a loss of power or value.[4]

Note also that our "moral passion" takes the form more of rage against the violator than constructive love for the victim.[5] It is an unforgiving rage, which denies any responsibility of going beyond itself to permit forgiveness for the agent of oppression or to "forgive" the God who has allowed a tragedy to happen, in order that there may be some constructive outcome.

Neither dismissal nor the defeat constituted by despair or rage are authentic, constructive responses to victimhood. They are evasions, and they are destructive. Dismissal wreaks destruction in the victim whose claim is denied and is thereby re-victimised; resentment and rage wreak destruction in the person possessed by them. What, then, will be involved in an authentic response to victimhood, which retrieves and fulfils the authentic moral content of concern for the victim? This unfolds as we explore, as the ultimate encounter with victimhood, the crucifixion of Iesus of Nazareth.

Jesus the victim

Jesus saw himself (Lk 7:18-23 and parallels) as fulfilling the prophecy of a coming Messiah who would liberate victims: "then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like deep, and the dumb shout aloud." (Is 35:5-6)

Jesus' acts of liberation and healing were more than physical in intention, however: they were given as signs of the in-breaking kingdom of God, bringing ultimate victory both over the material agents of victimhood and the power of victimhood personally to cow people into dismissal or defeat. And this purpose was accomplished as Jesus fulfilled another pattern within the scriptures: the victimhood suffered by God's prophets and righteous ones (Lk 11:47-51, etc.).

How, then, does Jesus the victim bring this ultimate victory? It will be illuminating to explore this indirectly, by considering first how the Church has sometimes evaded the issue of victimhood either by dismissal or defeat, and then how we must see Jesus the victim actually as engaging this evasion.

When faith dismisses victimhood

David Hay and Kate Hunt, in their research on "Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church", makes the following comment:

George Steiner suggested in his book The Death of Tragedy (1961) that in the course of European history, the classical Greek sense of life as tragic was overcome by the advent of the fundamental optimism of the Judaeo-Christian belief system. We are wondering whether, forty years on from Steiner's analysis, after Auschwitz and after the many other atrocities of the 20th century, we see in post-Christian society the return of a tragic sense of life… If at the deepest level there is a conviction that life at depth is pitiless and utterly meaningless, then the optimism of Christianity become incredible. The people we spoke to were well aware of this, and it is an issue that church people need to face much more directly in their dialogue with secular culture.[6]

Steiner, it seems, saw Christian faith simply as *dismissing* tragedy by telling a story in which everything is resolved in a happy ending. Now perhaps the Church has often given people good reason to think this. Perhaps it has often proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus in such a way that the death of Jesus is not allowed seriously to engage with the experience of victimhood, effectively dismissing it; and has cheapened divine forgiveness in the act.

When we allow Jesus the victim to confront such dismissal of victimhood he shows us his crucifixion anew: it is the ultimate violation and defeat of all that is meaningful and good and offers hope for human life under God. It presents us with an outrage deeper and darker than any victimhood we have yet faced. It presents us with the spectre of the ultimate victim, now come to pass. There remains for us no trace of grounds for optimism about ourselves or the security of human life and meaning. Our condition is worse than that which we had understood as having been addressed by the resurrection of Jesus. Accordingly the resurrection is in turn more than we have understood, *showing itself so precisely as we see anew the horrendous victimhood of Jesus.* In other words, the huge meaningfulness of Jesus' passion cannot be divorced from the spectral meaninglessness intimated by his victimhood: we ask ourselves, overcome with awe, what sacred love is this which gives reign to, and suffers, its own final denial? It is only as we hold on vigorously to this paradox that we may speak of Jesus' passion as having always been part of God's eternal plan. Otherwise our faith in his resurrection is superficial and ultimately dismissive.

When faith is defeated by victimhood

There arises for Christianity a complementary danger to that of dismissing victimhood, however. In the Church's concern to let the cross speak to victimhood today, it may unwittingly allow Jesus to become merely an icon for all victimhood. We may project on to him all the self-pity and rage of our defeat by victimhood, allowing him no freedom actually to speak to our defeat: we may let our defeat *dictate how we see Jesus as a victim.* I have attended Christian devotions, especially on Good Friday, in which the figure of Jesus has been used in this way. I am reminded also of the depiction of Christ in Jesus Christ Superstar as a petulant victim of his Father in heaven.

When, rather than using Jesus as an icon of our own victimhood, we allow Jesus the victim to confront our self-pity and rage as victims, what do we find? Firstly, we find our familiar feelings of self-pity and rage awakened and presented with new, unqualified warrant: here what has defeated us finds ultimate

expression. But these feelings of ours are *engaged*: we are *personally shown* this ultimate victimhood in the first place by Jesus – Jesus who enters fully and freely into the depths of sorrow and lament, embracing his victimhood without being overcome by despair or rage. In so doing Jesus shares in the immeasurable sorrow of his Father over his faithless servants and now becomes for us, in turn, a channel of grace: paradoxically, as we are drawn into his own victimhood we find ourselves *liberated* fully and freely to embrace the grief of injustice and tragedy, and dignified with the power to confer the gift of forgiveness, like him, without reserve.

Cross and resurrection

In this way the story of Jesus' death and resurrection takes us beyond the dynamics of tension and resolution, pain and relief, loss and recovery which characterise many a sentimental tale. In this story, paradoxically losing and finding are at once more *closely intertwined* and *more radical in their opposition*.

Thus it is true that the resurrection of Jesus speaks beyond contradiction of a victory over Satan's power to paralyse us in denial, despair or rage. But it is a victory already implicit on the cross, and a victory which always *speaks to* the cross. We cannot finally separate Jesus' resurrection from his crucifixion, which would be to dismiss victimhood without facing it; we cannot separate his crucifixion from his resurrection, which would be to admit defeat as we are overwhelmed by the scandal of victimhood. And yet cross and resurrection each open us, in their radical opposition, depths we have not fully fathomed – depths in openness to which, by the grace of God, our souls are enlarged as we are drawn further into the mystery of divine forgiveness. Austin Farrar wrote "the cross defeats our hope; the resurrection terrifies our despair"[7]; and this always remains our situation as cross and resurrection encompass us.

This Gospel message or story presents itself in every way that the Gospel of God's kingdom was presented by Jesus of Nazareth – in teaching and exhortation, in acts of liberation and in the whole witness of self-giving love.

Sacred and secular

There is much more which invites exploration here, not least the rich resources provided by the Gospels and the Scriptures for reflection upon victimhood. Let me close, however, by observing briefly what is *sacred* in this account of victimhood, what the sacred is like, and how it relates to the secular or passing world.

On the one hand the sacred is not absent from the world, leaving us in a relativistic world where "nothing is sacred" and everything permitted, and we are (secretly) gods who define and pursue our own goals. If we think and act like this we actually dismiss and deny that which is sacred. On the other hand the sacred is not simply present and identifiable with particular "locations" (institutions/places/figures/beliefs/practices) or with ourselves as the narcissistic centre to which our world is assimilated. We are not faced by the kind of sacred "subject" the violation of which authorises despair or rage, or sacrifice. If we think and act like this we actually show ourselves defeated by the moral demands of love. Rather the sacred is revealed in the loving figure of Christ which patiently suffers his own violation. His love reveals, on the one hand, that *the sacred is here in our world* in God's work of love, and is not to be dismissed. His love reveals, on the other hand, that *the sacred is found in the self-sacrificial work of love towards* all *who dismiss or are defeated by* the moral demands of this same love. The sacred love of Christ draws them into the fathomless dignity of his own suffering forbearance and forgiveness – that all may finally be transformed and made sacred under the sovereignty of God.

Endnotes
1. Alexander Solzhenistyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (London: Collins, 1974), Part One: The Prison Industry.
2. On this see Michael Polanyi on the phenomenon of "moral inversion". Polanyi himself acknowledges clearly the moral self-contradiction implicit in this. See, for example, Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1967), 56-60.
3. See, for example, Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation* (New York: University of New York Press, 1990).
4. Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 129, 130. The whole of Chapter 3, "Remorse", is relevant.
5. To move from the limited focus of outrage to constructive love demands of the victim that they lose their innocence, as Rowan Williams points out: "As claimant or plaintiff, the oppressed, silenced self is simply a sign of another's guilt; the morally interesting business lies in dealing with that. But as an acknowledged 'civic' voice, as participant in the defining of goods, the self emerges into risk." (Williams, 116-7). There appears a parallel between this limited focus belonging to a certain sense of victimhood and to the wider phenomenon of resentment described by Max Scheler in Ressentiment (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) and traced briefly by Richard Sennett in recent American political life (Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), 277-282).
6. David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People who don't go to Church* (Centre for the Study of Human Relations, University of Nottingham, 2000), 38. Actually Steiner was more concerned, it seems to me, with the fortunes of tragedy as a dramatic genre than with tragic sensibility in general.
7. Austin Farrar, *The Glass of Vision* (London: Dacre Press, 1948), 139.

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