

The Theology of MASH

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I have many weaknesses and foibles, collecting nick-nacks as souvenirs on our travels; nick-nacks which adorn our study as souvenirs to trigger happy memories; I also have quite a few watches – I argue if ladies can have all this jewellery, I can at least have a few watches! And as Dianne will tell you one of my favourite hobbies is to collect good DVDs – and I have to admit I have quite a few of these in my library. Not quite taking over all the cupboards in our home, but extensive nonetheless! These DVDs are becoming harder and harder to come by as people go more and more into on-line streaming.

One of my prize possessions is the complete series of MASH – all 256 episodes, recorded over the period 1972 – 1983, winner of 14 Golden Globe awards and still appearing regularly on the TV channels. I don't mean the movie that was made with Donald Sutherland, which I thought was slick and cynical and easily dismissed; no, I mean the TV series with Alan Alda which is regularly laced with clever dialogue, wit, irreverence and outrageous humour. It is also laced with tragedy, agony, pathos, soul searching, frustration and anger.

MASH stands for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital and the series follows the fortunes of MASH unit 4077. It's a surgical hospital in tents and mobile because it sometimes has to pack up everything and move when the fighting becomes too close and intense.

It is based on the Korean war (or to use the sanitised term "military action" as war was never officially declared) which was waged from 1950 until 1953– in which around 280,000 American, South Korean and allied troops were killed; and if you add in the North Koreans and innocent civilians the number would have been well over a million. It was a tragedy indeed – but the even greater tragedy is that the sad situation still exists after these 74 years! The Koreas are still separate, North Korea still is separate, private and belligerent. Apart from a few brief relaxations the border remains firmly closed and families which are split across the 38th parallel still cannot reach each other to hug and support their loved ones.

What Dianne and I like about the TV series is that at one moment you can be falling off your chair in laughter at the moments of outrageous humour which occur regularly and a moment later there will be tears rolling down your face when faced with the grim reality that was sacrificing so many young lives and the fact that those in the middle of it could do no more than to grin and bear it. And then you come to realise that it is this very humour which gave a little

light in a very dark world and allowed each and every one of the characters to face each new day with its overpowering challenges.

Although fictional, it must have portrayed very accurately the feelings and reactions of those caught up in the real Korean war - and every other war for that matter. And the relentless tragedies of the Ukraine and the Middle East come to mind.

There are a host of characters depicted in the TV series that one can easily resonate with as one proceeds through the episodes.

There is Major Margaret Houlihan in charge of the nursing staff who was brought up in a strictly military family and who tries to make her father proud of her by doing everything “by the book” – even if that is often impossible.

There is Corporal Max Klinger who often dresses in women’s clothes in the hope of getting a section 8 discharge due to mental instability. He is however as sane as everyone else in the camp.

And there are many others, however this morning I want to concentrate on two characters as they say something very clearly to me and they both have a direct bearing on my faith.

The main character and gifted surgeon Captain Hawkeye Pearce and the camp chaplain Father Francis Mulcahy.

Hawkeye could not be described in any way religious, and yet he is, but not in any conventional sense. He would not attend church service unless required to do so or to commemorate a fallen comrade or when Father Mulcahy needed particular support. And yet he would spend hours upon hours saving the lives of young soldiers, almost dropping from exhaustion and yet without any thought for himself. He would then rail against the senselessness of patching up these young men only to send them back into the battlefield to get wounded again or maybe killed outright the next time. He would also rail against the top brass who would pompously visit occasionally and treat the whole thing like a chess game with the soldiers as pawns in a game where they could be moved around and put at risk without much thought at all, if it created a slight military advantage. Hawkeye however saw these pawns as sons, brothers and fathers each with a life to live with loved ones back home.

I know of many in real life who are like Hawkeye, not committed to a conventional church-going Christian life but who are doing God’s work of

loving, caring, healing and supporting all the same. I am thinking of the late Doctors Fred Hollows and Victor Chang amongst many others.

I am reminded of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew Chapter 25 where we read

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me."

So, God's work and grace is not just confined within the walls of any church or any church structure. Paul also alludes to this in Romans Chapter 2 when he says of those outside the law

"Since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, this will be taken into account on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ."

And I can conclude from this that I should look very closely and I will see God operating through the lives of many people who might appear quite unlikely at first sights.

And maybe this relates to Psalm 14 that we read together this morning

"For God is present in the company of the righteous"

Father Mulcahy is the Roman Catholic chaplain who finds himself slap bang in the middle of this horrible situation of death, destruction and often hopelessness. He often finds himself administering last rites, or as an emergency aide in the middle of the operating theatre holding drip bottles, mopping blood and comforting patients tortured in body and soul.

He is definitely a sleeves rolled up Christian who has earned the universal respect of all around.

Father Mulcahy fits perfectly into the commission from Jesus in Matthew

"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven"

But the thing is that Father Mulcahy has not got it all together. He is not sure why all this senseless killing is going on and often begs God in his prayers to give him some meaning in all this chaos. He knows his God exists and is close to him every day, but begs and pleads with Him to give him the sense and meaning he is so desperately seeking. Often his prayers are quite agonised.

How often have we prayed those self-same prayers seeking confirmation that God is indeed present and close to strengthen and comfort when things are bleak and hopeless, or when the whole world seems to be being overtaken by sin, selfishness, greed and the lust for power. When we pray for confirmation that in the long run God is in control, that the world is not spiralling into senseless chaos, and there is meaning!

The thing to note about Father Mulcahy is that even though he had his struggles to understand and was burdened by doubts, he could daily draw strength and wisdom from his God who he knew was very close.

You know you don't have to understand things totally to be able to draw benefit from them. Most of us would have a GPS navigation system in our car from which we draw benefit constantly. Very few if any of us would however fully understand the miracle that is occurring to allow us to find our way to our destination to the nearest meter! The satellites, the timing signals corrected by special and general relativity, the intricate maps listing every laneway and side street everywhere!

There are so many things which we use and benefit from daily without understanding their workings fully.

Of course we too will have doubts in our faith, and there will be things we cannot understand; but that does not stop us feeling God's presence and strength in a very real way if we allow him into our lives. And in spite of our uncertainties we can confidently state "I know that my Redeemer lives – and there **will** be meaning to it all in the long run!"

MASH is just a TV series I know, but for me it explores the depths of the human psyche and resonates with me. And it is not total fiction but is reflecting the real situation of the Korean War and all the heartache and searching for hope that occurred amongst those real people in that real tragedy in that real country – a tragedy that is on-going even today.

The other fact that is real is the God who inspired and supported those characters in the series can stand close and support us today, right now in all our circumstances of life. That's not play acting – that is real!

Thanks be to our God who is very real and is with us today

Amen.