

THE PRECIOUS WHOLENESS OF THINGS

A short reflection on the Lampedusa cross

I was born into the world many years ago. More properly, you might say I was *dropped* into the world, rather than born. I am not entirely sure where it all happened. I'd like to think it was somewhere in Equatorial Africa so that I could have memories of monkeys leaping through my branches. But dropped I was into warm rich soil, where I could snuggle my roots down into the fertile earth and grow up straight and tall towards the bright sunlight. It must have been somewhere on the slopes of the Atlas Mountains, because now I think of it as a young tree I could see the distant glimmer of the sea I was later to sail on.

I rose among many companion trees, my young green leaves rustling like theirs in the warm winds blowing from the Sahara, and I saw flocks of birds flying overhead, their little bodies dark against the bright blue sky. Sometimes they landed on my branches and rested there over night before travelling on; sometimes they built nests, and I became familiar with the hungry chirping of their fledglings.

I might have grown old there on the warm slopes, but one day a woodcutter chopped me to the ground. I can still remember the thump as I landed, and the shower of broken twigs and chips that flew into the air. He turned me into rough-hewn lengths of wood and sent me down to the coast on a cart pulled by two donkeys. And there I found I had been sold to a shipbuilder. A clever man he was, who sawed and smoothed me, and shaped me to become part of a small boat, painted in the lovely colours of the waters, orange and green and blue.

That small boat became in turn the property of a fisherman, an old man who only wanted to feed his family, with a few fish left over for the local market. He it was who launched me into the unfamiliar, always moving world of the sea. Those were the happiest days of my life, when under a hot sun the glistening fish came leaping up and over the side, to gape and flap in a shower of glittering scales in the bottom of the boat.

But like the old man, I grew old too, until the repeated coats of fresh paint could no longer hide the scars on my surface or the rust marks where the nails held me to the frame. And then it was that the dark man came and gave my fisherman much money for his own dark purpose.

The moon was hidden by gathering clouds, and a big wind was rising when they came to me. All those people, those poor people. Men and women and even little children. The strangest thing about them was that they were completely silent. Nobody talked to anyone else as they climbed over my heaving side, filling my boat until its gunwale was almost level with the surface of the waves.

I will never forget that silence as we pushed off into deep water and the blackness of night. Silence until the storm rushed upon us, with a howling wind. Silence until, helplessly wallowing and shipping water, the boat began to sink, and in the twist and turmoil of the waves our timbers could no longer hold and sprang apart. Then they began to scream and cry

for help. Those poor people. I will never the sounds of their terror, as they splashed and bobbed in the water, until the last strong swimmer had gone under with a bubbling yell.

I floated on, a single plank, and eventually I stranded on an unknown sandy beach and lay among hundreds of other bits of shattered timber, until I was picked up and taken to a dreadful place indeed. A graveyard for the flotsam and jetsam from the many vessels that had foundered like mine off the rocky shores of the island of Lampedusa.

I might have been tossed on a fire and burned to ashes there, but I was fortunate; I was rescued by a carpenter from the island, who took another piece of wood from a different boat and fashioned us together as a sign of his grief. He burned his name into me: Francisco Tuccio. Later I learned that I was now in the shape of a wooden cross, on which an important man had died hundreds of years before. And do you know? The men who put him to death on that tree were legionary soldiers from the same country which now owned the island on which I had floated ashore.

My adventures didn't finish there in that carpenter's workshop. I was carefully wrapped and sent to yet another country on the other side of the world. And here, where I stand now, I at last found kindness and compassion, because as a water-worn piece of timber and no longer a rooted tree, like some crippled refugee I could not stand unaided. Yet another craftsman collected pieces of one of his native trees, tossed like me into a landfill, and glued and shaped them into the beautiful footing I now have.

So here I stand erect once more, having travelled from the mountains of Africa, across the Mediterranean, to the shores of Italy and finally to these distant islands on the other side of the globe. Still wearing the blistered paint that once made me glorious, still recalling the heat of the African sun, the strength of the wind and the salt water of the great sea. My memories are birds calling to each in the sunrise, and the splash of leaping fish; of families chattering around me when we brought the catch in, of others screaming for help as they drowned in the surging waves. I bear within me memories of joy and terror, of honest craftsmanship and heartless corruption, of love and compassion. I was part of the green world of nature, I have become part of your human world. Let me speak to you now of the precious wholeness of the world.

AMEN

Colin Gibson 12 August 2018