

God: Some Conversations

How do you speak about God?

1 – 11 July 2024

Participant Papers

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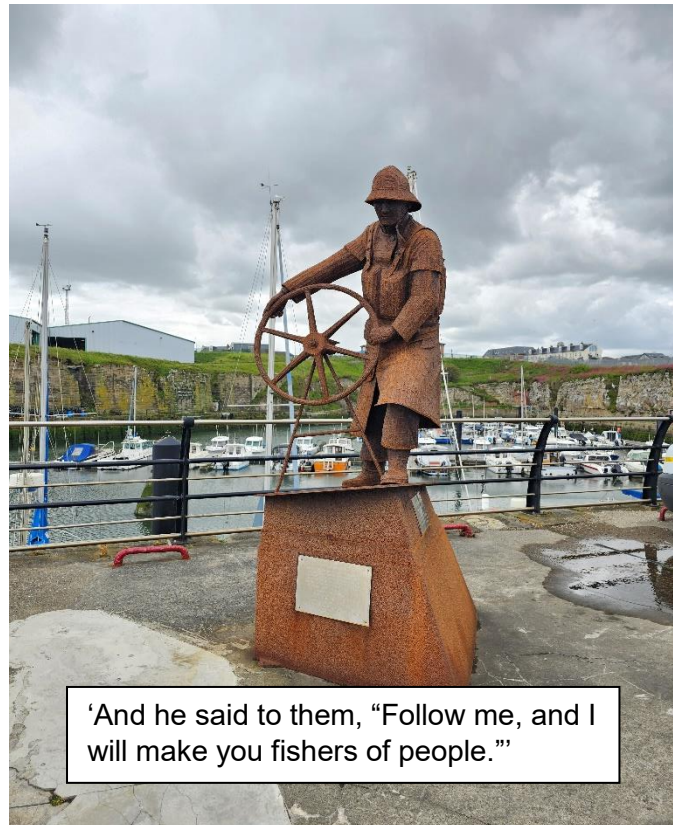


ST GEORGE'S HOUSE CONSULTATIONS

Brenda Forrester

'How Can Ecumenical Partnership Reflect God's Speaking into Today's World?'

St. George's College
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Discussion Paper.



‘How Can Ecumenical Partnership Reflect
God’s *Speaking into Today’s World?*’

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11th June 2024.

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Matt. 4:19 *NRSVUE*.

Photograph of 'The Coxswain' by Ray Lonsdale, taken at Seaham Harbour 10.06.24

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Introduction

Cesar Manrique was an artist and visionary in the twentieth century. He ‘rescued’ his home island of Lanzarote from a reputation of being the ‘laughing stock’ of the Canary Islands. By enhancing the island’s natural resources and qualities using art and design, Manrique transformed a barren wilderness into a sought-after tourist destination.

A quote on the wall of Manrique’s ‘Volcano House’ in Tahiche says, “I believe in humankind as a totality. I don’t believe in religions, or in borders, or in nationalities, or in flags.”¹

The film *Mad Max: Fury Road* ends with this quote, “Where must we go... we who wander this Wasteland in search of our better selves?”²

Whilst Manrique sees humankind as a grouping, a society without borders, the *Mad Max* film deals with living when the privilege of decent society is stripped away; human nature is polarised into ‘good for all’ and ‘good for self’, regardless of cost.

Jesus bookends time with his disciples with two commands. The second command is his great commission to the disciples.³ Jesus clarifies in this commission, what he meant when first calling the disciples from their nets to ‘fish for people’. Before returning to heaven, Jesus makes clear they are in the business of ‘discipling’, for all people: ‘all nations’.

Holding these thoughts, we will now explore the concept of working ecumenically in today’s ‘wasteland’ of a post-Christian world, ‘to disciple’ the greatest possible numbers of new believers. We will discuss the meaning of ‘better self’, and how ecumenism enhances this. We will argue that working together needs to reflect God’s character, to be attractive as a ‘better way to live’.

Whilst generally we are not yet living in total chaos, today’s world appears to be obsessed with self, greed, power, money and fame. In a world increasingly driven by the beasts of social media and secular influencers, Christianity is frequently portrayed as a ‘laughing stock’ (to reference pre-Manrique Lanzarote). Yet living as a disciple of Christ offers us a ‘better way’; as John writes, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”^{4, 5} How do we show the secular world this ‘better way’ by our common Christian life, lived together?

The Body of Christ: Fruit of the Spirit.

When we look at humankind’s sinful nature; the three-fold temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil, it is no wonder that Christians are in the minority, especially in

¹ Cesar Manrique, 1978

² *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) Directed by George Miller, Quote from *The First History Man*

³ Matt.28:19a ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations’ and Matt.4:19 NRSVUE

⁴ John 10:10b NRSVUE

today's world. Yet, in a world obsessed with self, the narrow path of Christian living offers a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. As a minority, does it not make sense to work more closely with our ecumenical kin? Looking at the fruit of the Spirit within me today, I can testify to the experience of being 'born again', when becoming a practising Christian, aged 36. That 'μετάνοια' (metanoia)- 'a change of mind, a repentance'.⁶ Being an adult convert, perhaps this pivotal moment is more obvious for me, than for a lifelong Christian?

The fruit of the Spirit within me today, however, didn't appear immediately after that moment of asking Jesus into my life. I now understand something of the *increasing* fruit of the Spirit, as being a journey on a narrow path and indeed a lifelong work we will never fully complete. It is a walk with the triune God by our side, in prayer, study and worship. I describe to my congregation the metaphor of being,

'like a stone with rough edges, placed in the river of the Holy Spirit. The more time we spend in God's kingdom, the more our rough edges are smoothed away'.

Spending time with God has allowed me to come to know His voice within and recognise His fruit in others. Let me now introduce Jez and Jill. Together we have an ecumenical fortnightly service of praise called, 'The Well' with a free church in the parish (called Living Hope) led by Jez and Jill. The Holy Spirit in me recognised the Holy Spirit in Jez Fletcher, immediately upon meeting. He and Jill are now great friends. The Well offers a relaxed space where people can come and encounter Jesus. I haven't the resources to run this service alone, but more importantly, *The Well* would not be *The Well* without working in partnership with Living Hope church. Likewise, we have just begun a 'churches together' movement with the Roman Catholic church. Now all three churches in the parish are working together and unexpected blessings are emerging.

John the Baptist spoke of repentance, this *turning*, linked with fruit of the Spirit. We read in Matthew,

"But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance"⁷

Living as part of the body of Christ helps increase our fruit, offering an accountable community. It also offers the secular world a witness to 'a better way' of living. I have never experienced such challenge and simultaneously such peace, as I enjoy living in my current role, leading a Christian community. Also, working with the two other churches in a parish of circa 26k people, adds an extra dimension, offering us greater reach and greater richness, than working separately ever could.

I have mentioned growing in the fruit of the Spirit. Another phrase would be Christlikeness. In Appendix A are a few bible verses speaking about the kingdom of

⁶ <https://biblehub.com/greek/3341.htm> Strong's Concordance accessed 08.06.2024

⁷ Matt. 3:7,8 NRSVUE

heaven. For clarity, this discussion paper is concerned with the kingdom of heaven we enjoy *whilst still living*. I believe in a God of love, a God who welcomes the prodigal home. Controversially, I also believe that love transcends all; that when we die we all have the opportunity to be gathered to God, if we so will. I don't believe that on Holy Saturday, Jesus descended to hell in a 'one-time' way only, but in an 'out-of-time' way also, for us all, to release the captives for all time. I cannot pretend to know or understand the whole mind of God, who could?

My theology of 'God is love', is absolute. Do we also become convicted by the Holy Spirit when we sin? Absolutely, a loving parent will nudge their child in the good direction; love does not preclude correction. Will we be perfect when we die? No, only Jesus was truly without sin. Hence that chance for us all to be 'gathered' at the point of death.

The 'better way' in this paper, refers to living our best lives in God's kingdom, *here on earth*, growing in Christlikeness as we journey. Those folk who do not know God and follow His way, are the ones (I believe) living in hell on earth, without knowing it. The devil prowls this earthly realm; "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy".⁸

Working with our ecumenical kin in this parish is characterised by *love and unity*. Our focus is on loving the community and shining Jesus' light into the parish. We bear together in our difference with astonishing grace and patience... and it is working! Difference is worked out privately among us leaders, over tea, cake and good humour. Our open and loving personalities and a commonly shared generosity of spirit provide oil to grease the wheel of sharing together. None of us is 'precious' of our own turf. Canon Alan, Jez, Jill and I are (crucially) NOT empire builders, but kingdom builders. I feel this makes *every* difference.

One tactic the devil uses is ridicule. That sense of 'laughing stock'. As Christians, we do not help our cause when we argue about difference publicly. The media is quick to report and exaggerate our theological arguing. Isn't it time we surrender to Jesus' great commission and return to the singular priority of loving, as we see Jesus doing?

C.S. Lewis writes this chilling quote from a teacher demon to his novice, 'One of our greatest allies at present is the Church itself'.⁹ Regardless of our stance on 'what happens when we die', same-sex blessings, women priests, etc., ministry among the unchurched shows me often, that people are not *living*. They are bound in chains. My life has never felt more free, even with the many rules of the Church of England, because living now means walking with God.

Having established the better way of living, as the body of Christ and being in a minority, it would make sense to me that we who share the fruit of the Spirit with our ecumenical brothers and sisters, work more closely. My spiritual director (a Society priest and deeply wonderful man) says our denominations are like spokes on a wheel. Christ is the centre of that wheel and the closer we come to Christ, the closer we come

⁸ John 10:10a

⁹ Lewis, C.S., *The Screwtape Letters* HarperCollins Publishers, London, 2002. 5

to each other. If you look at the photo on the cover of this paper, it depicts a ship's wheel, with spokes. It is a statue called Coxswain (captain) and honours the work of the RNLI. In a world more Kafka-esque and 'yellow brick road' in nature than God's intended Eden, we need 'all hands on deck' of our heaven on earth way of life, our lifeboat. As the remnant, is there a way we can work as one, to set more captives free?

What's Wrong With my Denomination Anyway?

In Thomas' essay on the role of hospitality in receptive ecumenism, we hear, 'receptive ecumenism creates space for churches to pause, examine themselves and ask, 'where are we broken?'¹⁰ and, 'are there areas of church life which need healing?'¹¹ Thomas argues, instead of bringing out our best china to serve our ecumenical guests, we are to bring to the table all the cracks and flaws as our offering. It is in this way that we can hope to improve ourselves and our respective denominations. Now, we do not always recognise our 'cracked' china, which is why we need to bring to the table our *authentic* selves, with openness and honesty, as far as we dare.

There is a real danger of living in echo chambers, favouring spending time with those we agree with. In this way, we miss something of the 'fullness of God'. Looking at our social media habits, we are drawn to what interests us and what we agree with. The social media sites algorithms then increase similar suggestions as it learns our 'taste', thereby drawing us deeper and deeper into a silo of like-minded folk.

I am in four clergy facebook groups. They have different themes and qualifiers of membership, for instance, one group requires I am both female and a parent, another for those in the first five years of incumbency, yet another that I am female and 'orthodox' (for lack of a better word, forgive me) on the subject of same-sex marriage. It is fascinating to witness the general tone of these separate groups, knowing what are 'safe topics', what will gain the most 'likes' and what is frowned upon. These groups have become echo chambers in their own right. By virtue of my being a member of multiple groups, I can see the polarisation of each particular group.

In a conversation with my son recently, we discussed knowing who we were by our interactions with others. Conversations and encounters with other people can help us decide our own likes and dislikes, values and life ethic. If we live in silos of like-minded people, even within denominations of church, our view of the world at large is skewed and we can stunt our potential for growth. My son and I have marvellous conversations and both agree upon being lifelong learners. This is in sympathy with the 'stone in a river' metaphor from earlier. The more we rub up against 'other', the more the Holy Spirit can hone us in Christlikeness, as we discover more of what

¹⁰ Paul D Murray, 'Searching the Living Truth of the Church in Practice: On the Transformative Task of Systematic Ecclesiology', in *Modern Theology* 29/4 (2013): 251-81 cited in *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ* Balabanski, Vicky and Murray, Paul (Eds.): 'Receiving Women's Gifts': An Exploration in the Role of Hospitality in the Practice of Receptive Ecumenism, Gabrielle R. Thomas. *A Forum for Theology in the World* Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2018 ATF Press, Australia 124

¹¹ Ibid.

grieves and what consoles our spirit, in our walk with God. Thomas' argument for bringing out all of our china with our ecumenical partners, cracks and all, offers us a chance to improve, a chance to discover which parts of our denominational living might be erring from the narrow path.

Of course, there are some issues upon which we will disagree: women priests, gay marriage, using non-alcoholic communion wine, whether we pray to Mary or only to God, etc., to name but a few. If, however, we can be vulnerable enough to show our cracks, there offers a moment of grace in which to grow as disciples ecumenically, bearing with our fixed differences well, increasing in Christlikeness where we can.

What else would it require for us to bear together well?

The Perils of Theological Angst.

I have mentioned coming to a living faith at the age of thirty six. For me, it was a profound realisation of Jesus' love for me, followed by a passionate reciprocation of my love for God, lived out through worship and service. Previous to this epiphany, I searched many, many spiritual avenues looking for higher meaning to life, for happiness and peace. These avenues included reiki, tarot, witch-craft, crystal healing, angel cards, spiritualist 'church', mediums, Buddhism and new age paganism. I remember from 'the outside' of Christianity, a strong belief that Christians were to be avoided at all costs due to my perception of their overpowering judgmentalism, corny, twee, 'sad' half-life existence of 'goodie two shoes' living, with a million rules and dullness.

How incredibly glad I am to be proved wrong now I am an 'insider', but what led me to those pre-christian perceptions and value judgments? My limited knowledge of Christianity came from the very few people I knew to be Christians and from the media. The media gave me a damning report of what Christians believe and how they live. I mentioned above how the media are quick to emphasise our arguments. We are portrayed as the 'laughing stock', the brunt of many jokes, the scoffed and walked-over ones, the do-gooders and judgers. The actual Christians I knew of? Well... a bit too 'full-on' for me, loving but too forceful in their beliefs and rules, kinder than the average person on the street but a bit 'suspect', perhaps wanting to trick me into joining them. After a lifetime of 'running from the Christians', I was finally evangelised by J. John, at the 'Just 10' event in 2008.

For the secular world 'out there', we Christians are viewed pretty poorly by many in society. As I write, I have had to be 'protected' by a group admin. on the 'Download Festival Girls' group on Facebook. My crime? Posting about praying for dry weather, with a picture of me at a Christian festival in my clerical collar, asking, 'Who is with me'? I was accused of pushing my religion onto everyone and the group admin. turned off the comments, deleted the messages and reminded folk of the rules of welcoming all, not having a rule prohibiting politics or religion, the rule stating respect for everyone's identity and the rule against hate speech and bullying. As I say, we Christians are viewed pretty poorly by many in society. To be honest, I was shocked

at the response to my Facebook post. I guess I've been living too much in my Christian silo 😊

By operating in our *denominational* silos, we can be in danger of great 'theological angst', getting too involved in niche topics whilst ignoring the disciples commissioning by Jesus to, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.'¹²

Whilst the news headlines continue to be fed with quotes like, 'Pope apologises over reported homophobic slur',¹³ the evil one is aided in perpetuating Christianity as 'laughing stock'. Worst of all, when we get things so wrong, or obsess over theological hobby-horses, we misrepresent Jesus! Where is prioritising the good news of Jesus' love for us? The good news spoken so beautifully to a huge marquee full of the curious, drawn to an event called 'Just 10', making the ten commandments relevant for this twenty first century enquirer, making the story of Jesus so attractive that I have changed my whole life to follow Him?

Closing Thoughts.

- The same Pope Francis says, 'Love will unite us'.¹⁴
- God is the true meaning of love.
- What better way of showing God's love than uniting with our ecumenical kin?
- To do this well, we must dedicate our lives to growing in Christlikeness, bearing together in authenticity, vulnerability and demonstrating those amazing nine fruit of God's Spirit.
- If we can get over ourselves and do as Jesus commissioned, we can show a hurting, broken world a 'better way of living'.
- Together, we can better reflect God's speaking into today's world.

Appendix A.

Matt.7:13-14 'Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.'¹⁵

Matt.7: 21-23 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons

¹² Matt. 28:19, 20a NRSVA

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czrrexn0094o.amp> accessed 28/05/2024

¹⁴ Church Times No. 8408 10th May, 2024. 3

¹⁵ All bible references use NRSVUE

in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you who behave lawlessly.'

Luk 13: 22-30 'Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. Once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and take their places at the banquet in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.

Isa.35: 8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

1 John 3: 1-6 'See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.

Derek Kerr

***Pastoring the persevering. Caring for the casualties.
Ministering in a border parish in Northern Ireland and
giving time for forgiveness***

Pastoring the persevering. Caring for the casualties. Ministering in a border parish in Northern Ireland and giving time for forgiveness

The backdrop, so to speak, of this paper is set in the Enniskillen bombing which was orchestrated in 1987 when the IRA murdered 11 people who were waiting at the Cenotaph to take part in the annual Remembrance Day Service. While none of those left alive, or their families, will ever forget that day I especially want to mention two people who had to live with the aftermath of that event. It is my interaction with them that draws me to this subject.

The first, who I know more by reputation, was the public figure of Joan Wilson whose daughter, 20 year old student nurse Marie, died the day after the bombing from her injuries and whose husband Gordon immediately forgave his daughter's murderers. The other was less public so I will call him Ross. For those from Enniskillen the true identity of Ross would be immediate when I say that both his parents died either side of him when the wall of an old building fell on them. All Ross has to show, by way of outward injury, is a small mark on his forehead.

As I know Ross better I will give my specific reason for drawing on his experience. We have mutual friends and a few years after the bombing Ross joined these friends for a few days at my home when I was a curate. Ross, a fine young Christian man who wanted to do the right thing by God in this situation, talked about how his brother was bitter towards his parents' murderers and that he himself felt almost guilty that he didn't hold the same emotion. I had already been scheduled to preach on forgiveness at the Sunday evening service but now, with Ross sitting in the congregation, I felt the pressure to be careful not to be glib or clichéd.

Joan Wilson was by her husband's side as he uttered those amazing words on the news shortly after their daughter died that he "forgave her killers". He went on to be honoured by the Govt of the Irish Republic, being given a seat in their Senate and was given many other accolades for his courageous stance. Joan admitted later to not finding it so easy or automatic to forgive but wanted to support her husband. She did get there as, she believed, God wanted her to but to the day she died she never wanted to meet her daughter's murderers.

These two people and others like them, notable Rev Julie Nicholson who resigned her parish because she was unable to forgive her daughters murderers in the London bombings on July 7th 2005, make clear, if we didn't already get it, that forgiveness is no easy road. Now I live and work in another border parish where such stories also exist.

In light of this, questions I want to look at, for your consideration, are:

Is forgiveness more than an ideal. Is it a must?

Might the process of getting to the ideal of forgiveness be, in itself, a sign of obedience?

Are we to forgive or wait until it is sought?

What does Jesus' command to forgive 70 times 7 suggest regarding both the number of times we forgive and the time taken to get to that point?

Looking at the question: **Is forgiveness more than an ideal**, I give some thought to what life would be like and, for many, has been like when forgiveness is absent. I am glad that in this area I am unable to talk from experience because I have never needed to deal with this issue. At least, not in any real meaningful sense whereas so many in my country have had to and many still do. I begin my answer with the words of Mr. Bates in Downton Abbey. When it emerged, in conversation between him and his wife Anna, that his late wife has orchestrated her own death to make it look like he'd murdered her there was disbelief. Anna then said that she hoped Vera was burning in hell. Mr Bates quickly interjected telling Anna not to go down that road because once you were on it there was no way off. Now while I don't agree that there is no way off such a path, because Christ is able to break into anyone's story at any point and change its direction, still it must be difficult. Imagine all the time spent and wasted on thinking of ways to wreak revenge or the utter frustration and feeling of injustice eating away when there is no hope of achieving that because either the perpetrator is no longer alive or govt policy leans towards leniency. Quite apart from it being wrong to wreak that revenge or to want to do so, many good and useful lives are wasted because all efforts are consumed in this desire. This is not healthy mentally or physically and it is detrimental to other relationships. While it most definitely has the potential to lead to further violence. So, difficult as it will be, forgiveness is a must. Leaving Christian ethics aside for a moment. Imagine a world where the other cheek was turned. In my country, I have to say, how things would have been so different if "tit for tat murders" had not been carried out.

Is the process of getting to the point of forgiveness, in itself, a sign of obedience?

While I want to return to the subject from a Christian view point, it needs to be said that there are fine people out there in the world and in history who have forgiven but have done so with no Christian command prompting them.

However where the Christian is concerned we are not given a choice in the question of forgiveness. It is a requirement. Jesus commands this of us and we will look at that in more depth. However taking that assumption on board let me consider whether that process and all that it entails is itself a real sign of obedience?

You have lost your husband or wife. The person most dearly loved is gone. Your children are crying for their mother/father. Some terrorist organisation or other phones into a local radio station to claim responsibility. Politicians from that side of the community are on TV trying to justify this latest atrocity. Then a wee while down the line then next one happens and you are forgotten about.

I had parishioners in a previous parish that had to leave their border farm because of death threats from the terrorists. The father was in the security forces and his name was discovered on a hit list. In the space of a day his home was emptied and moved. When his children got off the school bus and saw the farm swarming with security forces they told me how they walked up their lane assuming that their father had already been murdered.

Two major issues came out of this real life scenario that had an effect on the family for years and, in a sense, still does. First there was the trauma for the children in leaving their community and the friends they had made. Even their Roman Catholic neighbours and friends, those supposed to be on the opposite side, were genuinely sorry to lose them. This will have had an effect on them mentally and the fall out of that for school performance etc. is difficult to calculate. I am glad to report that all the children have done well for themselves but I don't pretend that such is the case for everyone. Returning for a moment to my friend whose parents were murdered at the Enniskillen bombing and there is a similar story with not so good an outcome. Not my friend himself but a brother who found it very difficult to get past what happened to his parents, as mentioned above, and the emotional fall out that affected his performance in education, in relationships and this, certainly for a while, affected his whole family.

Returning to the family who had to move from their farm and years later there was the question of farming subsidies that they had missed out on. A great deal of money that they would have been entitled to was never recovered. Money that neighbours, whom it was considered were part of the reason they had to leave in the first place, were able to avail of.

Perhaps the loss of money ought not to be a consideration when it comes to the issue of forgiveness but that is all very well when it's not our issue. Poorer results in education, financial help suddenly unavailable or unavailed of in the past, the ripple effect of even one member of the family sinking because of the acts of others and we begin to see how even the process of getting to the place of forgiveness can require constant obedience. Not to bow to inner doubts that to forgive is to betray the rest of the family has been incredibly challenging.

So my next question pertaining to this issue is **whether or not we forgive or wait until forgiveness is sought?**

To answer this I want to go to Romans 5 v 8. "but God shows his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." I am aware that with any theological/ Bible issue it can be easy to be over simplistic and therefore trite. I hope that this is not seen as such by the reader for certainly it isn't meant to be nor is it viewed as simplistic on my part. There is here, in my opinion, the very deep and incredible act of love and the offering of forgiveness on the part of God. We are told in the following verses that God gave his Son to die for our sins so that we might be saved from His wrath and all this before we looked for it. Indeed all this before people knew they needed to look for it. V10 says that God did the reconciling through the death of his son when we were still his enemies. No waiting around on God's part for us to make the first move of showing remorse. No this was on offer regardless of whether we took up, or even wanted, to take up that offer. Then Paul rejoices in v11 that this offer has become for him and his readers a reality. Are we to wait for someone to ask for forgiveness before giving it? No! Following the example of God Almighty that offer is to be put on the table. Whether someone takes up that offer is immaterial. We need, if we are in a position of being offended against, to forgive both for our own sake, for the sake of our family and others around us and because, as Christians, it is the example of God, seen in his giving Christ.

So in coming to the nitty gritty of life as people have to face it every day and, in particular in relation to my topic given in the title of this piece let me ask the final question I set myself.

What does Jesus' command to forgive 70 times 7 suggest regarding both the number of times we forgive and the time taken to get to that point?

Mrs. Wilson, mentioned at the beginning, who lost her daughter in the Enniskillen bombing admitted in later years that she did not find it as easy as her husband to forgive quickly. Not suggesting that it was easy for her husband but that it was achieved much quicker that she was able to do.

I believe that this verse/command, found in Matthew ch 18 v 19-22, calls us to the ideal we have been looking at in the above but at the same time speaks to Mrs. Wilson's experience. Jesus is not suggesting that once we have forgiven 490 times then we are at liberty to set this command aside and wreak revenge. He is telling us that we must go one forgiving 'ad infinitum'. However it will take a long time to get there for some/many.

The fact that Peter asked Jesus this question in the first place lets us in on the secret that Peter was not naturally inclined to forgiveness. He was hoping Jesus would go with his suggestion of only having to forgive 7 times. Most of us, if we know we have a get out clause coming, could probable manage this amount of forgiveness. Isn't it a relief that Peter was no better than the rest of us or most of us at least, myself included! Despite all that has gone into any particular scenario that requires our forgiving and the people who have caused that scenario (see above) God requires of us the same as he gave. He requires of us the ideal of forgiving before it is sought and to go on forgiving even if it is never sought. That is what is asked/ demanded of us in the 70x7.

That said the same 70x7 speaks of the fact that this will take time and will be on going. Even if it was something that we had no trouble with or qualms about forgiving it would still not happen in an instant. For many, it will take returning to recommit to that forgiveness. After all we are human! We have been looking at some serious injustices in the lines above. Even if only one event were to befall someone the requirement to forgive will be a lifelong activity and will, for most of us, not happen immediately. Not all Christians have the stoutness of character that Mr. Wilson had and this verse is acknowledging that fact.

So, in conclusion:

The questions again by way of summary points

Is forgiveness more than an ideal. Is it a must?

Yes it is a must. After the example of God himself.

Might the process of getting to the ideal of forgiveness be, in itself, a sign of obedience?

Definitely so, because at any stage we could crumble and many of us have. Requiring us getting back on the straight road.

Are we to forgive or wait until it is sought?

Again, after the example of God himself and his action through Christ Jesus, we are to forgive and to offer forgiveness. Under the heading of it being a must we saw how **WE** could be destroyed by a lack of forgiveness. This is important for anyone moving forward but certainly so for Christians. Regardless of whether others seek it, we must forgive. Both in obedience to God and for a Christian witness.

What does Jesus' command to forgive 70 times 7 suggest regarding both the number of times we forgive and the time taken to get to that point?

In all of this, as with the time I preached on the subject of forgiveness with my friend in the congregation, I hope I have not been simplistic. I have seen the long term effects of terrorism on my best friend, on parishioners whose mother was murdered by the IRA. I have a parishioner in my new congregation who sits in a pew where, a few meters away on the wall, is the plaque to his brother murdered by the IRA. I have little personally in life for which I need to forgive others but I am surrounded by those who have. In my role and conversations the 70x7 must gently and sensitively be shared and explored. I need to be there for the long haul because the long haul there will most definitely be.

Before my final comment allow me to give a story from Malcolm Muggeridge. He had the opportunity to visit the Soviet Union in 1930 and, though a self-confessed non-Christian, decided to attend church while there. He said that, despite all that the church had dealt with and were dealing with he was impressed by their faith. In particular during the service the people stand and at one point say, "There is no hope but in God alone". Muggeridge admitted to being moved by such a statement in such circumstances.

In pastoring the persevering and caring for the casualties may my ministering in this border parish in Northern Ireland be a blessing as I give time for forgiveness and offer God's permission for it to take time. Yet to strive to bring hope for the future in God alone.

Iain Lothian

***Let us Listen with our Heart: A Call for the Church to
engage with the re-emergency of Jewish prophetic voices
in order to reignite its own prophetic voice***

LET US LISTEN WITH OUR HEART:

A call for the church to engage with the re-emergence of Jewish prophetic voices in order to reignite its own prophetic voice

Introduction

I recently supported a Palestinian doctor who was arrested and charged at a rally while peacefully protesting against the war on Gaza. Outside the court I talked to his wife. She asked me what I did. I told her I was a priest in the Scottish Episcopal Church, and then found myself deeply embarrassed and apologising that the church I was part of was silent on the Israel-Palestine situation, and, at the time, not even calling for a ceasefire. She looked at me with both compassion and confusion in her eyes, and asked this simple but profound question: *'Why can't they listen with their hearts?'* I realised that I had been asking this very question when in conversation with many colleagues, parishioners and friends.

First and foremost, a listening heart requires us to engage with the cries of the afflicted, to put ourselves in their shoes and feel their pain, and be in solidarity with victims of injustice and oppression. In short it requires us and the church to re-ignite our prophetic voice by not only listening to Jesus and a long line of Old Testament prophets but to also listen to modern day re-emerging Jewish prophetic voices speaking into the present crisis.

A helpful framework and road map to navigate this call to both listen with and speak from our hearts and re-ignite our prophetic voice can be found in Walter Brueggemann's seminal book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, where he describes the conflict between royal consciousness and prophetic imagination.

Royal consciousness versus prophetic imagination

Brueggemann describes royal consciousness as the imperial consciousness of the king, or whatever domination system is in place. This is a system favouring those who hold power; it is characterised by a high degree of affluence, satiation and comfort for certain elite parts of society. Its politics is one of oppression and violence, and the establishment of a controlled, static religion which legitimizes the status quo. It is typified in the Old Testament by Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, and is personified by a hardness of heart, numb to the cries of the suffering.

Pitted against royal consciousness comes prophetic imagination, typified by Moses, the later prophets and Jesus, which dismantles the politics of oppression and exploitation, and evokes an alternative society based on freedom, justice and compassion. It aims to penetrate the hardness of heart and numbness so prevalent within royal consciousness, enabling a listening heart and a capacity to weep for and with the suffering. This imperial consciousness survives through its capacity to still the groans and pain of the suffering and go on with business as usual; it cannot tolerate compassion and those who stand in solidarity with the victims of their oppression and violence.

In this conflict between royal consciousness and prophetic imagination, the role of language cannot be overstated because speech and language shapes our consciousness and defines reality. So the prophetic voice reintroduces heart, passion and compassion into discussion, because it knows that when passion disappears there is no humanising energy. 'Cool', 'dispassionate' language has no place within the prophetic voice, which stands against those supposedly 'reasonable' voices who see and understand 'both sides'. Instead, prophetic discourse challenges the double-speak of imperial talk. It understands that change will not come unless truth is named and addressed.

*'The prophets do not offer reflections in general. Their words are onslaughts, scuttling illusions of false security, challenging evasions, calling faith into account, questioning prudence and impartiality.'*¹

Kairos Palestine Document: The loss of the prophetic voice in the church

In December 2009, the Kairos Palestine document, *A moment of truth: a word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering*², was published. This articulates Brueggemann's classification of royal consciousness in a

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (HarperCollins, 2001)

²Based on the original Kairos Document, a theological statement issued in 1985 by a group of mainly black South African theologians based predominantly in the townships of Soweto, South Africa, at a critical juncture in the apartheid era there.

contemporary context, which it renames ‘state theology,’ standing over and against prophetic theology. However it brings in a crucial third component at this point: church or priestly theology, which is sandwiched between the two.

The document argues that ‘church theology’ in the context of Israel-Palestine has, for the most part, lost its prophetic voice – a voice that is in solidarity with the afflicted, which boldly challenges manifest injustice and advocates for a just solution to the conflict. Instead, ‘church theology’ has responded with embarrassed silence, rationalisations for oppressive, unjust actions, and the taking of the ‘middle ground’. In so doing it uses Christian language of ‘compassion’, ‘reconciliation’, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘unity’, while simultaneously avoiding recognising the violence, horror, and injustice of what is happening on the ground. It therefore separates these concepts from any acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

Addressing the present slaughter in Gaza, Munther Isaac, a prominent Palestinian Christian pastor and academic dean of the Bethlehem Bible College, pinpoints this kind of distortion. He says that *‘for the most part, what we get from church leaders are carefully crafted, balanced statements designed to convey the impression of compassion but ensuring a minimum of controversy, for fear of any backlash from powerful lobbies and being perceived as anti-Semitic.’*³

A superficial compassion of this kind fails to name, let alone challenge structural injustices, including Israel’s flagrant violation of International law and the causes of the deepening humanitarian crisis. Its language is domesticated, softening the harsh realities of daily life for Palestinians and distancing us from their suffering. For this reason, words like ‘occupied territory’, ‘apartheid’, ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘genocide’ are censored.

The result is that, amidst atrocities, the church seeks to ‘stand in the middle’, posing as a mediator, offering what the Kairos Palestine Document calls counterfeit or superficial reconciliation, devoid of a critique of power imbalance and the abuse of power, and therefore devoid of justice. A summary of this approach might be: “We must be fair and listen to both sides of the story. If the two sides can only meet to talk and negotiate they will sort out their differences and misunderstandings, and the conflict will be resolved.” But in truth, as the prophet Jeremiah (6:14) cries out: *‘They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.’*

The Palestine Kairos document argues that nowhere in the Bible or in Christian tradition does it suggest that we reconcile good and evil. On the contrary, we should confront and oppose evil, injustice, oppression and sin, not come to terms with it. As Desmond Tutu famously reminds us: *‘If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.’*

The document goes on to list the injustices and oppression of the Palestinian people as well as outlining the mission of the church to speak the Word of God courageously, honestly and lovingly. It challenges the church to regain its prophetic voice, to listen with its heart, to name truth, and to allow suffering to speak, as well as evoking a future based on freedom, justice and compassion for all people.

Understanding that there is no one Jewish voice, but different voices

The biggest obstacle to the church reclaiming its prophetic voice on Israel-Palestine at present seems to be the fear of being perceived as anti-Semitic. As a result it listens to one voice only, the predominant Israeli government voice of royal consciousness, of king and state, which equates criticism of the state of Israel and Zionism with anti-Semitism. This dominant voice, claiming to speak for all Jews, domesticates language to such an extent that truth is suppressed and the cries of the suffering go unheard, so that business can carry on as normal. This one ‘Jewish voice’ is echoed throughout our politics and mainstream media. Yet a fundamental characteristic of Jewish culture, religion and tradition is the space for disagreement, for different voices to be heard, debated upon and argued over. But the voice of royal consciousness, of state theology, is intent on shutting down all alternative voices.

Noam Chomsky says that *‘The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow lively debate within that spectrum. That gives people the sense that there’s free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of debate.’*⁴

³ Munther Isaac, from his Christmas address, ‘Christ in the rubble’ (<https://time.com/6550851/bethlehem-christmas-sermon-nativity-rubble/>)

⁴ Noam Chomsky, *How the World Works* (Hamish Hamilton, May 2012).

The range of debate on Israel-Palestine has thereby been narrowed and censored to such an extent that there are few dissenting voices questioning the very presuppositions of what is happening in Gaza/Israel and Palestine. But what of other Jewish voices and of the subaltern perspective and conscience?

Will Alden: A return to Shabbat

Will Alden, a Jewish pro-Palestinian activist who was part of an encampment at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) has written an illuminating article entitled, 'A new Jewishness being born before our eyes,'⁵ which both critiques royal consciousness and evokes a more hopeful future. Robin D.G. Kelley, Professor of History at UCLA, confirms this when he says the student protests at his university are '*transporting us to another place, compelling us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enabling us to imagine a new society.*'

Alden declares: '*Right now the future of our people is being written on campuses and in our streets. Thousands of Jews are creating something better than what we have inherited.*' This imagining of a better future is deeply embedded in Jewish faith, tradition and ritual, in particular a theology of Shabbat, which Alden affirms is '*to have a taste of the world to come, a holier one of peace, justice and compassion.*' He describes a Passover Seder of olives, strawberries, and watermelon, to symbolise solidarity with Palestinians, along with a Shabbat service where Muslims, Jews and Christians sat and prayed together. This is a solidarity which not only evokes a more hopeful world, where different faith groups can co-exist peacefully, but challenges the American/Jewish establishment's narrative that the protests are inherently anti-Semitic.

Alden describes their goal as being '*to end the US- backed war on Gaza, secure liberation and justice for Palestinians and to get disclosure and divestment from companies complicit in Israel's war crimes*'. Although Alden admits that on this basis alone the protests have not, so far, been successful, he believes that their counter voice challenges the status quo, shows that people care about the plight of Palestinians, and thereby offers them hope and solidarity.

Alden goes on to contrast the brutal nature of the clampdown on these camps, the behaviour of pro-Israeli counter-protest groups, and the community spirit and solidarity of the student encampment. One of the students, Isabelle, is quoted as saying that the co-operative spirit within the camp amazed her. But, simultaneously, she witnessed some of the most horrific things she had ever seen in the backlash. Videos show the violence of the police and pro-Israeli counter protests shouting insults and slurs, spitting at demonstrators, and using physical intimidation and violence. Alden says that, '*as a queer, gender-nonconforming woman, I've experienced plenty of hate throughout my life. I'm pretty tough. But the hate and vitriol we absorbed on Sunday for identifying ourselves as Jews critical of Israel, as Jews who support Palestinian freedom, was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.*'

Melissa Finell, a filmmaker and instructor at UCLA, supported this, '*Not only did they curse at us and yell at us that we should be ashamed, that we weren't real Jews, and blow loud airhorns in our ears and accuse us of supporting Hamas, but one of the hardest moments came when a fellow Jewish woman screamed in my ear, accusing me of wanting to murder her children.*' These testimonies highlight the sheer courage of alternative Jewish voices; of those who are often isolated and labeled 'self-hating Jews' by the dominating voice in their own community. By returning to the traditions of their faith these young Jewish student voices are returning to their Jewish prophetic roots and listening with their hearts, because Shabbat is fundamentally about the 'law' written on the heart.

Naomi Klein: an exodus from the shackles of Zionism

Recently, in a speech at an outdoor Seder in New York, the Canadian-Jewish activist and author Naomi Klein vociferously argues for Jews to stop worshipping the '*false idol of Zionism*', resonating with Moses raging against the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf. She goes into full preacher mode, with a speech resounding with biblical metaphors taken from the stories of Israelite emancipation from slavery in Egypt. This is a story embedded in Passover, repeatedly referring to the false idol of Zionism – an ideology which justifies land theft, ethnic cleansing and genocide, as well as taking the transcendent idea of the promised land, a metaphor for human liberation, and turning it into a land of violence, oppression and military occupation, whose very foundation required the mass expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians from their ancestral homes in the Nakba. Klein's use of biblical imagery continues when she compares the

⁵ Will Alden, 'New Jewishness being born before our eyes',⁵*The Nation*, 10 May 2024

present Israeli government, which sees Palestinian children not as human beings, but as demographic threats, with Pharaoh fearing the growing population of the ancient Israelites and ordering the death of their sons.

As an ideology rooted in racial superiority, Zionism, Klein declares, is actually anti-Semitic itself. It is a betrayal of every Jewish value, including the value of questioning, a practice included in the Seder with its four questions asked by the youngest child, and has led too many *'of our own people down a deeply immoral path that now has them shredding the core commandments: Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not covet.'*

Then in true prophetic mode she moves from critiquing the royal consciousness of Zionism to evoking an alternative Jewishness, which cannot be contained by an ethno-state, but is international in nature.

*'Our Judaism is the Judaism of the Passover Seder: the gathering in ceremony to share food and wine with loved ones and strangers alike, a ritual that is inherently portable, light enough to carry on our backs, in need of nothing but each other: no walls, no temple, no rabbi, a role for everyone, even- especially- the smallest child. The Seder is a diaspora technology if ever there was one, made for collective grieving, contemplation, questioning, remembering and reviving the revolutionary spirit.'*⁶

Klein then returns to the motif of liberation and exodus by proclaiming that we need, *'a liberation from the Zionist project that commits genocide in our name and has no plan for peace.....We seek to liberate Judaism from an ethnostate that wants Jews to be perennially afraid, that wants us to believe the world is against us so that we go running to its fortress and beneath its iron dome, or at least keep the weapons and donations flowing.'*

She ends her speech with a rallying cry: *'The false idol of Zionism has been allowed to grow unchecked for far too long. So tonight we say: it ends here. What are we? We, in these streets are the Exodus. The Exodus from the idealistic shackles of Zionism.'*

What is telling is that Naomi Klein, a secular Jew, situates her critique of Zionism within the religious context of Judaism by using prophetic biblical language, imagery and symbols. This passionately dismantles the royal consciousness of the domination system and evokes a new Jewishness founded on traditional Judaic values of freedom, justice and compassion. Like the prophets of old, Klein is critiquing Zionism and the actions of the modern state of Israel from inside her Jewishness. She is declaring powerfully that this is a betrayal of true Jewishness, and therefore anti-Semitic.

Not in my name: Voices from the Holocaust

Many contemporary Jewish prophetic voices come from Holocaust survivors and their families, condemning Israel's actions, and proclaiming, *'Not in my name.'* Stephen Kapos⁷, an 87-year-old Hungarian Holocaust survivor, criticises the way that the experience of the Holocaust has been used to justify the massacre and genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, describing it as an insult to the memory of those who suffered and died in the Holocaust. He argues that the conflation of Jewishness with Zionism does nothing but increase anti-Semitism, and he debunks the narrative that recent protests in solidarity with Palestinians are anti-Semitic by saying that Jewish voices are warmly accepted. He wishes that there had been protests like these during the Jewish Holocaust, because he and others experienced a massive abandonment by the great majority of people in Europe at the time. They turned a blind eye, as many are to the horrors of Gaza today.

The aim of preserving the memory of the Holocaust is to ensure that history does not repeat itself and that genocide 'never again' happens. The Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial is a powerful reminder of the horrors of the Nazis death camps. However the terrible irony is that in rightly enshrining the Jewish memory of these horrors, many are erasing the horrific history of another people as the hills that Yad Vashem are built on are littered with the remains of those Palestinian villages that stand witness to shattered lives and ethnic cleansing of a people. Jewish liberation theologian Mark Braverman says that, *'to find meaning in the memory of the Holocaust means working for justice for Palestine: there are too many parallels, too many ways in which Israel was doing to Palestinians with what the Nazis did to us.'*⁸

⁶ Naomi Klein interviewed by Mehdi Hasan on 'Unshocked', May 2024. https://youtu.be/Hjt9M1CS9Qs?si=GNKgq1sjc-yAGbi_

⁷Stephen Kapos on Double Down News, April 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qokhPdgvgw0&t=44s>

⁸Mark Braverman, *Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews, and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land* (Synergy Books, 2010), p. 39.

These parallels are a powerful and shocking critique of what is happening in Gaza and the occupied territories right now. Like Germany, Israel places itself as a righteous, peace loving nation, fighting for the democratic world, forced to take arms against external threat. So they expand their territory into occupied lands, claiming self-defence in whatever they do. The Israeli government use dehumanising language to describe Palestinians as inferior in order to overcome moral inhibitions and legitimise their actions, with the defence minister Yoav Gallant openly referring to them as ‘animals’. Meanwhile, Netanyahu has publicly framed the conflict as, *‘a war of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness.’* The Israeli state has a powerful propaganda machine and a huge number of lobbyists, all aiming to silence or smear alternative voices. They cast doubts on verified independent sources, whether journalists on the ground, UN officials, human rights officials or, in the case of South Africa, whole governments. They also exaggerate and invent atrocities to justify their own actions.

Conclusion

The prophetic voice calls us to hear the cries of the suffering and be in solidarity with them, to challenge injustice and oppression in whatever form it takes and to show tenderness and compassion – a true heart of flesh rather than stone, echoing Ezekiel: *‘And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh’* (Ezekiel 36: 26).

The heart of flesh requires the church to refuse to collude with a royal consciousness, a state theology that limits and closes down free speech, inoculates, numbs and distances us from unfathomable pain and suffering, and which creates a narrative where persecutors are perceived as victims. We need to speak from the heart: to name injustice and boldly to challenge a politics of violence and oppression wherever it exists. We have to continue to imagine and evoke a new world of freedom, justice and compassion. Finally, we need to be in solidarity with those brave Jewish prophetic voices which seek to break from a Zionist heart of stone and which embody that Jewish heart of flesh which refuses to accept a ‘Jewishness’ that is dependent on the oppression and suffering of others.

These alternative Jewish voices feel a sense of exile from the mainstream and disorientation as they are shunned, isolated and dismissed in a variety of ways. However many are claiming back their core Jewish identity through the prophetic tradition, with its commitment to freedom, compassion and justice. Mark Braverman, describes in detail his journey from enchantment with the miracle of a Jewish-majority state to one of solidarity with suffering Palestinians. He describes a moment when sitting on a hill overlooking Jerusalem, when he says, *‘I now felt their suffering and pain. And my eyes shed streams of water for them, my Palestinian brothers and sisters, and yes, for the brokenness of my own people.’*⁹ Braverman allowed ‘suffering to speak’ to his heart, so that a heart-reshaping took place, a reshaping that many Jewish men and women have undergone as they go deep into their Jewish prophetic tradition. We as Christians also need to similarly let the same prophetic tradition speak to us and allow our hearts to be softened and reshaped at this present ‘Kairos’ moment.

⁹Mark Braverman, *Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews, and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land* (Synergy Books, 2010), p. 32.

Hannah Mears

Safe, Solid, Holy

Safe, Solid, Holy

Those entrusted with positions of Christian leadership have the potential to speak about God through their own lives, not only verbally but also through their character. In this paper I engage with questions around the character development of ministers using a brief, three-part summary: *safe*, *solid*, and *holy*. As someone involved in the formation of those who offer themselves for licensed ministries, both LLMs (Readers) and clergy, I have found this a powerful expression of the character to which Christian leaders are called and an articulate reflection of the God they represent. God is safe, solid and holy, and I argue that those who lead in God's name are also called to embody these attributes.

In 2021 whilst attending a Stage Two Ministry Division training event, I heard Joy Gilliver, the Head of Discernment for the Church of England, state that, ultimately, we are identifying people for public ministry who inhabit these qualities: "They are people who are safe, solid and holy."

My observation is that the six qualities of the recently-developed Shared Discernment Process focus on the detail of the gifts and make-up of an individual. *Safe*, *solid* and *holy* offers a broader character assessment and is therefore a blunter tool, yet I find it a powerful summary of the characters of people we need in leadership within the Church in a season of widespread uncertainty which is often expressed in distrust of those who lead.

How can the Church foster vocations in people so that their words and actions speak confidently of a God who is characterised by safety, dependability and holiness? This essay also asks where some of the failures have been in these areas for Christian leaders, the pitfalls we still face, and where we might identify that progress is being made within our Church.

Safe

The Gospels portray Jesus as someone who himself offered safety for people. In John's Gospel we might think of the way he diffused the sense of threat for the woman who was caught in adultery or the way he held a safe space for an anxious Nicodemus to have a faith conversation at night.¹

When Christian leaders are working with integrity and good pastoral practice then the churches they serve can be places of health and wholeness. Sadly, of course, the impact of betrayal by those in positions of trust can be both traumatic and life-long. As Jennifer Freyd and Pamela Birrell state, "Betrayal can be deeply traumatic, but we don't usually think of betrayals when we think of *trauma*. We all know about war, earthquakes, tsunamis, and car accidents, and often we assume that this is what trauma is. We so often miss the trauma of betrayal and its effects."² Tragically, due to the associations carried between faith leaders

¹ John 8: 1-11; 3: 1-21

² Jennifer Freyd and Pamela Birrell, *Blind to Betrayal* (Wiley, 2013), 49.

and the God they represent, the trauma caused from a betrayal of trust by those in Christian leadership often results in victims internalising an image of an untrustworthy, shame-creating God. Sallie McFague describes “this image of God as both psychologically powerful and dangerous because it inspires fear and humiliation.”³

My own observation is that safeguarding cultures and procedures are improving within the Church. Objections from volunteers around training and safer recruitment processes are becoming more unusual. However, we are also aware that this is not the whole picture. We also know too well from historic and more recent well-publicised incidents, the damage caused when instead of providing safety, Christian leaders have used their position to prey on the vulnerabilities of others. The reports from Soul Survivor in 2023 of allegations of abuse by its founder, Mike Pilavachi, sent shockwaves through both the Church of England and the wider church internationally. Apart from the obvious damage and shame inflicted on the male interns and others, we cannot know the impact on the vocational journey of those individuals. Are we missing people who would themselves now be in positions of Christian leadership had they been protected? The scale of the harm and its ripple effect is both tragic and difficult to compute. Reports in the media, the *Soul Survivors* podcast series by Premier Christianity, the video *Let there be Light* by Matt and Beth Redman, and the Church of England investigation all point to the need for strengthened accountability structures around those in leadership and the creation of open church cultures where behaviours can be questioned and challenged. Counterintuitively, it is the work of openness and challenge, which we sense is riskier, which actually keeps both those in ministry and those they serve genuinely safe.

Of course, the example of Soul Survivor is one case out of many, and it raises questions around a lack of accountability, a culture of celebrity, and systemic failures which lead to churches being unsafe. There is also, however, the need for a spotlight on personal character and responsibility. How do we recognise where individuals are not safe? How can this be part of the discernment process for ministry? And where people are already ordained or licensed, how can they become increasingly safe for themselves and others? While safe practice in ministry can never be completely guaranteed, an improvement within the Church of England’s vocational discernment process is the traffic light questioning tool. This requires candidates for ordained ministry to answer specific questions around areas of vulnerability such as substance abuse, pornography and the use of power using categories of red, amber, and green to gauge responses. Other parts of the wider Church such as the CPAS Arrow Christian Leadership programme use profiling tools which bring to consciousness areas of vulnerability drawing on resources such as Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rima’s *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*.⁴ However, the provision of such

³ Stephen Pattison, *Shame* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000) 229.

⁴ Gary L. McIntosh and Samuel D. Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: How to Become an Effective Leader by Confronting Potential Failures* (Baker Books, 1997, 2007). McIntosh and Rima highlight compulsion (especially around work patterns and the desire to control others), narcissism and the appetite for status,

programmes, which focus unashamedly on character development and growing through negative character traits, is sporadic in our training and formation processes. Could this be intentionally integrated into Continuing Ministerial Development across dioceses?

Solid

I belong to a book group which takes place in the local pub. The title being discussed recently was *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins. The novel revolves around a mother and son's attempt to cross the US-Mexico border at great personal risk. The group were surprised by the level of honesty expressed by a Catholic priest who warns the migrants,

This path is only for people who have no choice, no other option, only violence and misery behind you. And your journey will grow even more treacherous from here. Everything is working against you, to thwart you. Some of you will fall off trains. Many will be maimed or injured. Many will die. Many, many of you will be kidnapped, tortured, trafficked or ransomed.⁵

A member of the group said that the priest's 'religion' had nothing to do with his level of honesty. Another pressed me as to how I would respond. "Similarly," I replied. "He was a realist, so am I. He showed integrity instead of glossing over the truth. They needed to count the cost." Some of the group looked perplexed. In the ensuing conversation, I wondered if the group perceived 'religion' to be equivalent to the stuff of fairy tales or wishful thinking, but certainly not grounded in reality. The priest only has a brief mention in *American Dirt*, but the group seemed surprised at his robustness and honesty. We might describe him as solid – someone grounded in the reality of life.

Developing vocations in people who can speak for God in ways which point to resurrection hope, but who are solidly grounded in reality is no small feat. My observation of many Christian leaders and laity during the covid pandemic, for example, was that they swerved into a sort of toxic positivity. Great emphasis was placed on a revival which would be birthed out of this time with our churches being filled with new believers. I wonder how some of these messages landed with those working hard on the front-line and those grieving. How do we enable those training for ministry to speak of God in ways which are not naïve? We have in the narrative at the heart of our faith a great resource for both looking at hard realities and embracing hope. Refusing to let go of either the cross or the resurrection makes possible a life characterised by profound realism and abundant hope.

This ability to live with the twin perspectives of reality and hope is one of the great gifts Christian ministers can offer in the present climate. "We are," David Kinnaman of the Barna Group writes, "leading and ministering in an anxious age."⁶ Many people feel overrun by the

codependence and passive aggression as key areas of vulnerability for Christian leaders. Their work began the conversation about narcissism and the church before it moved into popular discourse.

⁵ Jeanine Cummins, *American Dirt* (Tinder Press, 2019), 169-170.

⁶ Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence* (Moody Publishers, 2022) 8.

sheer pace of change and are anxiously trying to find their bearings. Edwin Friedman, the family therapist, leadership consultant and Rabbi, argued that the most vital attribute to lead, especially in anxious human environments and systems, was a non-anxious presence: “The leader’s chief tool of influence is their presence.”⁷ There is a great need currently for Christian leaders who carry a quality of presence which is solid (not rigid), and brings God’s non-anxious presence into the reality of the lives they minister to. God is utterly realistic, is unsurprised by pain and yet is full of hope. So can we be. This is where a minister’s spirituality meets the sphere of their leadership. Philip Keller remarks, “There is nothing like Christ’s presence to dispel the fear, the panic, the terror of the unknown.”⁸ Equipping licensed ministers to navigate these anxious times should be at the very heart of our formational work.

There are factors, however, which erode the solidity ministers have even when they are ready to name reality and embrace hope. My observations from clergy social media groups, reading and conversations with colleagues is that many of us experience the strain of toxic patterns of behaviour from those within our care. Clergy are encouraged to take out insurance in fear that they might be suddenly handed a CDM. Surely something has gone awry here. We speak so much about clergy well-being, resilience and mental health. The *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy* conclude with two sections on clergy well-being and “care for the carers”.⁹ However, those in ministry are often asked to carry a cost which has little to do with Christ’s call ‘take up your cross and follow me,’ and more to do with a weakness in our Church systems. At the very least a lack of assurance and composure can creep into the public ministry of those serving in this climate. Might not the vulnerability of leadership in our context, compounded by factors such as malicious CDM processes, actually lead to a brittle defendedness? This consequence appears to be the opposite of either a personal solidity based on trust in God, or a sense of healthy belonging in accountable structures which the CDM legislation was intended to implement. What should be in place to better protect those called to represent Christ’s Church so that they exercise their ministry in ways which are assured and composed?

Holy

The road to holiness is a long one.¹⁰

As mentioned above, one of the shadow sides of ministry, is narcissism. Henri Nouwen writes,

Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A

⁷ Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence*, 100.

⁸ Philip Keller, *The Shepherd Trilogy* (Zondervan, 1970), 22.

⁹ churchofengland.org/resources/clergy-resources/guidelines-professional-conduct-clergy/guidelines

¹⁰ Judy Hirst, *Struggling to be Holy* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), 20.

little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. It takes very little to raise me up or thrust me down.¹¹

We might argue however, that since Nouwen's time, the problem has increased from both within and beyond the Church. Today sees endless podcasts, YouTube videos and websites dedicated to helping people battling with this area. Addictive cycles of approval seeking, to be recognised and validated on social media, can feed into narcissistic tendencies among all of us. The temptation for those of us in public ministry is to be preoccupied with reputation, influence, success, platform and power. Furthermore, as Desmond Tutu said during an interview in 2017, "The pressure to succeed has a lot to do with why people overstep the line. It is a peculiar weakness of Western culture where we have made a fetish out of success."¹² Tutu links a success-oriented culture directly with moral failure.

Chuck DeGroat writes persuasively about this destructive pitfall for Christian leaders in his research-based work, *When Narcissism comes to Church*.¹³ He describes the causal link between shame and narcissism, where narcissistic behaviours, especially at the most extreme level, are often attempts by an individual to shield themselves from their core feelings and the true self.

Holiness is the antidote to narcissism. "The saint is precisely one who has no 'I' to protect or project," writes Richard Rohr.¹⁴ We are aware, when we encounter holiness in the life of another, that we are meeting someone who has been able to take themselves from the centre of their reality and place God there. A life characterised by holiness speaks of God in ways which are attractive – not in the filtered photo sense – but in the sense that people see in us something different and good.

Recently, I met with someone applying to be an LLM (Reader) and he referred to his own wrestle with holiness. I found it refreshing to hear this word used during part of a discernment process, but was also struck by how daunting the word can be if we don't use it wisely. Emma Ineson reflects humorously about this tension in her book *Failure* when she describes the pattern of prayer used in the chapel of Lambeth Palace. She explains that prayer starts by using a book called, *Exciting Holiness*: "Day by day, we hear the stories of these great women and men of faith, who are much to be admired. I have to confess, however, I spend most of the time thinking that I could never live up to their examples of holiness and devotion."¹⁵

Growing in holiness, however, is not about becoming overly scrupulous, or "holier than thou," but rather about bringing the whole of who we are before God. It is then that the

¹¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994)

¹² Ineson, *Failure*, 19.

¹³ Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Inter Varsity Press, 2020)

¹⁴ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*, (SPCK, 2013) 151.

¹⁵ Emma Ineson, *Failure* (SPCK, 2022), 48.

parts we are proud of, and the parts we would rather hide, can be touched by the Holy Spirit's transforming presence. Holiness cannot be separated from love. As Judy Hirst writes in *Struggling to be Holy*, "Holiness is much less about self-discipline than it is about learning to entrust yourself to the God who loves you. It is about taking the risk of allowing God to interact with the truth of ourselves, no strings attached."¹⁶ The holiness we find so attractive then, arises from a true self which knows that it is loved and embraced, and is, therefore, undefended. Holiness grows from love, and so does not have to engage in narcissistic behaviour.

Judy Hirst points to an ongoing work of holiness for each of us.

We need to allow God to give himself to us, even though we are not worthy, and through the experience of unconditional love and forgiveness, we will be changed. The success of the venture is that we will become our real, best selves and this involves a different journey for each of us.¹⁷

Safe, Solid, Holy

Safe, solid and holy has become an essential tool as I work in the discernment process for those exploring vocation. These are essentials for Christian leaders in any age, but especially in an era when what has been unsafe is being exposed, the cultural currents are anything but steady, and, despite the Church and wider society's speaking out against narcissistic behaviour, social media feedback loops and the desperation for any signs of Church growth still create fertile conditions for self-centred leadership to flourish. Safe, solid and holy are traits I am seeking out in people I meet in my role, but they are the end as well as the starting point. They ultimately point to the God revealed in Jesus, whose holiness attracts, whose dependability fosters our trust, and who is our ultimate place of safety.

¹⁶ Hirst, *Struggling to be Holy*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

Bradley Page

***Speaking About God: Perspective, Priority and the
Architecture of Reassurance***

Speaking About God: Perspective, Priority, and the Architecture of Reassurance

The Reverend Bradley Page, BA, MDiv.

INTRODUCTION

As a bi-vocational clergyman I am often in situations where I am not known as an Anglican priest. In fact, most of my week is spent in secular employment and most of my interaction with other people is as a production manager in a large multi-national entertainment corporation: The Walt Disney Company. In faithfulness to both my baptismal and ordination vows, I call my congregation to speak about God and make Christian Faith findable in the modern world. The intersection of this call and the context of my secular employment provide a unique way to consider how we, and the larger ecclesiastical structures of which we are part, convey the central themes and guides of our Faith. In our telling of this story God is the main attraction and his love and truth in Jesus Christ are always at the center.

PERSPECTIVE: FORCED OR FALSE

[Disney's] Main Street USA was a strip mall dressed up in a scintillating Victorian costume.

- Karal Ann Marling

If you have ever visited the Magic Kingdom at The Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, you will know that the architectural centerpiece of the park is Cinderella Castle. As a 17-story Neo Gothic re-interpretation of a 19th-century French chateau, Cinderella Castle is an amazing illusion. It stands at a height of only 189 feet, yet it seems much larger, because Disney architects made use of a trick called “forced perspective.”¹ In their design the fake bricks, windows, and other details were made smaller as the structure grew taller, so that our perceptions of reality are fooled into seeing this fiberglass folly as a formidable 300-foot-tall stone castle.

We imagine that inside such an imposing edifice there must be grand and gracious spaces, somewhat akin to the state apartments at Windsor Castle, or at least some luxury accommodation for the heads of the Disney empire (as long-standing, but unfounded, rumor has suggested). The

¹ Karal Ann Marling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks* (Paris, FR: Flammarion, 1997), p.29.

fact is, that with the exception of some modest spaces for accommodation, costume changes, storage, and security, the vast majority of the castle's interior is taken up by the steel and concrete skeleton that supports its facade of fiberglass. It isn't a real castle after all.



Cinderella Castle (viewed from Main Street USA)

The vehicle which ushers us toward the seemingly imposing presence of Cinderella Castle is Disney's Main Street USA, a scaled-down version of a late 19th-century American town. Walt Disney intentionally chose a Late-Victorian style for this part of the Magic Kingdom Park because he believed this style of architecture was adequately nostalgic. The memory of the era was distant enough to aid in the development of illusion, yet familiar enough to be comforting and reassuring for visitors, while guiding them onward toward the ultimate fantasy of Cinderella Castle.² Through the use of these design techniques, our perceptions are manipulated so that we engage the illusion, we suspend disbelief, and we embrace a reality that - absent the context of "Disney Magic" - doesn't really exist.

² Marling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks*, p.79.

Like the immersive illusions of Disney's Magic Kingdom, forced perspective, false narrative, and a lack of authenticity abound in the modern world. We live in a time of great political and cultural division which is increasingly "post-truth." Post-truth is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as an adjective "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to personal belief."³ A quick glance at agenda-driven legacy media outlets, social media echo chambers, and the disinformation of self-professed news and information platforms will quickly illustrate how so many are wrapped up in the subjective narcissism of "my truth" and are captured by post-truth illusion.

The narcissism of this ecosystem, and the limited conceptions that grow out of it, make us less able to challenge our assumptions and less likely to submit our views to the scrutiny of facts. Resistance to the quest for truth is even greater when contending with the guide of a traditional religion like Christianity. The challenge presented, in brief, is that Christianity requires us to look outside ourselves to discover not only our vocation and work in the world, which is often difficult and self-denying or even sacrificial, but to find ultimate truth and meaning.

Considering this in reference to the vast number of guests who visit Walt Disney World, or who consume Disney entertainment more generally, the co-founder of VeggieTales, Phil Visser, has rightly described Disney's target market as "an audience of people who want to believe in something that doesn't require anything of them."⁴ For many people this is an ideal religion. Indeed, what could be more magical than a philosophy of life that prioritizes forced perspectives, subjective truths, individual identities, and - absent any truth claims or moral requirement - promotes a singular commandment: You do you!

Responsibility and a commitment to something more objective than my truth or your lived experience are what's needed. Where the Gospel of Disney is all about me and my truth, the Good News of Christianity is about a larger, more objective, truth and a greater priority.

³ OxfordLanguages (Oxford University Press, 2024), see <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>

⁴ Mark Pinsky, *The Gospel According to Disney* (Louisville, KY, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), p.10.

PRIORITY: WEENIES AND WAYFINDING

This is the way. - Din Djarin

In the Gospel According to John, Jesus tells us that we are in the world but not of the world.⁵ But it is in the world that we must find our way (and bring others along with us). When Christians speak about God we are, or we should be, providing direction to guide others to God's truth and love and to Christ as God's icon of truth and love for us all.

I am a guide, of sorts, in that much of my work at The Walt Disney Company is in the production of maps, created for guests to our theme parks and resorts, as an aid to wayfinding. The areas, or "lands" as they are called in our signature Magic Kingdom Park, are created with a focal point or icon to draw guests into the central theme or story being told in that particular area. Walt Disney often referred to these as "weenies."⁶ A "weenie" anchors an area, establishes a point of view, and gives a sense of orientation.

On our maps these are highlighted such that guests are led to the priorities of place and pointed toward the key attractions in each area. This is typically done on our maps by making the icon or central attraction outsized - *again a type forced perspective* - but in this instance not utilized to trick one's perceptions, or create an illusion, but to highlight what is most important about the themed land or area one is entering.

The map is a guide for the journey. But more than this, it suggests its destination, and provides



⁵ John 15:18-19 (ESV): "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

⁶ Marty Sklar, *Dream It! Do It! My half-century creating Disney's Magic Kingdoms* (New York, Disney Editions, 2013), p.90.

reassuring guideposts along the way to help us navigate what begins as territory created by another and unknown to us. This is someone else's story which, with our participation, interest, and assent becomes our story.

For Christians, the manner in which we speak about God is a type of wayfinder, a map and guide, that should lead to the central themes, teachings, values, morals, and icons of Christian Faith and Life. Unfortunately, some of today's churches produce a guide map to universal truths and moral absolutes that is confused, perhaps even mis-directional. They create an ecclesiastical and philosophical folly akin to the illusions of Cinderella Castle: Making use of the traditional language and the liturgical forms of Christianity to convey the appearance of catholic and apostolic faith while subtly revisioning their original and authentic meanings. In this we see the ancient and formative use of Scripture and the Sacred Tradition in the life of the Church effectively disabled by a hermeneutical forced perspective. In this many bishops and priests who would speak about God, no doubt with well-meaning and compassionate intent, are diminishing (even discrediting) the authentic and largely consistent witness of Christianity through the centuries.

Represented in *this* forced perspective is part of a movement away from catholic and apostolic Christianity toward a progressive and unitarian religion living under the facade of an ancient Christian faith. When pushed to the extremes the result is an ecclesiastical folly that mirrors the illusions of Cinderella Castle. While not an exhaustive list by any means, some contemporary examples include the celebration of almost any sexual intimacy as licit, the exponential growth in non-binary gender identities (and their detachment from biological sex), gender dysphoria (particularly among young girls groomed by online influencers), and an obsession with, and insistence on, the primacy of race and/or racial identity over and above every other value or characteristic.

In America this perspective is not only forced, it has become increasingly political with troubling implications for national unity. President Joe Biden has said, in an interview with a black American radio host, "I tell you what, if you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, then you ain't black." In this President Biden is aligning (and narrowing) political

belief and commitment to the singular and immutable characteristic of race.⁷ Of equal concern are the Christian Nationalists and culture warriors who stormed the US Capitol in January 2021, many of whom conflate political ideology with religious identity and work to align President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign with Christianity.⁸ Both oversimplify the diversity of political commitment in communities of racial or religious identity, with the latter exchanging the transcendent priority of Christianity for individual and party political interests.

Of course theological and political engagement with modernity and conversation around emerging cultural values are needed, but it is easy to get lost in these endeavors and go astray. In wayfinding the most important consideration is not how far we've come, but whether we are seeking the best way forward and, most important of all, are we actually on the right path and going in the right direction. Singling out the main thing from a host of possibilities - a "weenie" in a theme park, an icon on a map, or a universal truth in a subjective world - is how we find our way.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF REASSURANCE:
DEDICATED TO HARD FACTS AND COURAGE

To all that come to this happy place, welcome. Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past, and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future. Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America, with hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world.

- Walt Disney on the opening of Disneyland in 1955

In these times what is needed is a corrective guide designed to draw our attention to what is true and highlight what is central in our speaking about God. Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey pointed to such an authoritative guide, not only for Anglicans but for the whole Church:

⁷ CNN Politics Report (5 May 2020), see <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/22/politics/biden-charlamagne-tha-god-you-aint-black/index.html>

⁸ Christianity Today, *We Worship with the Magi, Not MAGA* (7 January 2021), see <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/january-web-only/trump-capitol-mob-election-politics-magi-not-maga.html>

“What is this Truth that has created both the Church and the Bible?” We worship the person of Christ, Ramsey says, who has given us both his word and his church as the total economy in which to interpret and live it. This means that “Christian knowledge and Christian love lie close together, and Christian theology is not only a detached exercise of intellect: it is the life of the one Body in which truth is both thought out and lived out.”⁹

As a parish priest this living “the life of the one Body in which truth is both thought out and lived” is the quest of my congregation.¹⁰ We are traditional Christians in that we believe in the “Faith once delivered to the saints.”¹¹ This faith has been defined for us in Holy Scripture and the life of the early church and shared from the time of the Apostles through to today. Like our Patron Saint, Nicholas of Myra, we are defenders of the Christian Faith and are committed to orthodox teaching and practice. Additionally, we accept the decisions of the Ancient Councils of the (undivided) Church and their interpretation of the Bible as authoritative and as containing all things necessary to salvation. There is love, joy, and welcome. But not every idea or attraction or subjective “truth” is celebrated. Like a theme park, there are boundaries, and sometimes - by commission or omission - we find ourselves outside the park or we fall off the map. When this happens we must seek to find our way back looking for the icons to guide and re-focus our attention to catholic and apostolic witness.

This is where the corporate nature of the church helps us respond to a culture which promotes individual truth as the height of wisdom and personal development. The larger truth helps us resist the forced (and limited) perspective of subjective experience and perception which, all too often, is simply the adopted views and opinions that make us feel the most content with ourselves and our situation. A faithful commitment to fact, truth, and reality is more challenging, but walking in the footsteps of saints and apostles gives reassurance and courage for the journey.

⁹ Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), pp.103, 107.

¹⁰ St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Kissimmee, Florida.

¹¹ Jude 1:3 (ESV): “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

EPILOGUE

I love working at Walt Disney World and I love working in the Anglican Church. At their best both are places where joy and sadness, encouragement and encounter, challenge and comfort, are wrapped up in hopeful imagination. They each provide environments to delve into the wonder of history, culture, science, and the human spirit and, in doing so, they stimulate awe and wonder. They are places where millions go not only for celebration, but for restoration and reassurance.

Yet, it must be their difference that matters most. One is about finding eternal meaning, while the other is about finding illusion and, therefore, temporary escape. One is about truth, while the other is about fantasy. In my secular work I help produce the guide to our theme park entertainments. In my vocation as a priest, and in speaking about God, I must BE the guide to the experience of life in a particular way, using the wayfinding aids of Holy Scripture and the Sacred Tradition, and through these to know and feel the source of all meaning and hope in our life and beyond our death: The truth and love of God in Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Tomos Reed

Reflecting on an end-of-life pastoral encounter: why the Church of England needs to start taking queer lives seriously

Reflecting on an end-of-life pastoral encounter: why the Church of England needs to start taking queer lives seriously

Tomos Reed

June 2024

1 Introduction

I begin by relating a pastoral encounter with a young queer man who had recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer before going on to record my initial intense response to our conversation. After briefly exploring the wider social context of our encounter, I turn to the three mainstream responses offered by the Church of England and argue that all fail to take account of the lived reality of his sexuality and relationships and of the wider trends in society he represents. I go on to argue that such failure is also linked to a failure on the part of all actors in the sexuality debates going on in the Church of England to be honest about the way we interact with Scripture and tradition. Before concluding, I tentatively suggest some qualities that a Church which wishes to pay serious attention to human sexuality, Scripture, and tradition might embody.

2 The Encounter

“What is it like when someone dies? I cannot stand the thought of my parents and my partner watching me become more and more broken. I don’t want them to bear that burden.”

James’ usually high degree of self-control was on the verge of cracking as he spoke, but he managed to fight back the tears that were welling up.¹ Until now, this 26-year-old’s only obvious response to a recent terminal diagnosis of cancer had been a mixture of calmness and resignation. The only outward frustration he had expressed to me was anger at knowing that his Ph.D. would not be completed.

“You’re right,” I reply gently. “There is brokenness when someone dies, but that’s not all. I’ve seen love there, and grace. Believe it or not there can even be hope and joy. And as for burdens,

1. James’ true name has been changed for the purposes of this essay.

isn't bearing one another's burdens an intrinsic part of love? If your mother or your father are your partner was dying, you might not want to bear that burden, but we both know you would."

"Yes, of course, don't be stupid. If only there was someone who's been through it all and could report back. That would just make everything a lot easier."

"Well, to be fair", I respond, "in one sense that is the central claim of Christianity. That's basically how Paul describes Jesus' resurrection. The Gospels too in their own way. Lucky for you, I've just celebrated Holy Week, so I can bore you to death about it if you like."

"Ha! It's a long time since I read the Bible." Clearly amused James continued, "I'm not sure what I believe any more, but I'd definitely say I am open to God. All I know is that the Bible doesn't believe in me. I'm one of those people who are clearly destined for hell. But I suppose the upside is that I'll be there will be my kind of people." A life-long member of the Church of England, James was at one time regular worshipper at his local parish church. Not longer after he came out as gay, around the time of his sixteenth birthday, his vicar asked him to stop attending church.

Unprompted, James goes on to describe himself very matter-of-factly as "polyamorous", "ethically non-monogamous" and as a "submissive kinkster" with a particular interest in BDSM. It is striking how easily he talks about the great enjoyment and fulfilment (indeed, in terms very similar to the way he describes the deep fulfilment he gets from his academic studies) he gets from aspects of the queer scene in London, especially his attendance at anonymous sex parties and BDSM events along with the man he describes as his "primary partner".

Although he clearly enjoys his attempt to shock yet another member of the clergy, I am particularly struck by the tenderness with which he describes his primary relationship. This partner has provided James with intimate personal care when the combination of radiation therapy and chemotherapy has left him too ill to move. It is the same partner who James occasionally wakes up next to in the middle of the night to find crying and who thinks that James has not noticed. And it is this same partner who continues to see beauty in James' broken and scarred body longer after James has stopped being able to see it for himself.

3 My Initial Response

My encounter with James prompts a long series of scriptural resonances and images within me that I struggle to do justice.

Our exchange about brokenness and holiness at death turns my mind to the ambiguities in John's crucifixion narrative.² That scene, with its mix of human weakness and divine power "evades our grasp", just as death and grace at a deathbed often do.³ In James' concern for his loved ones, I

2. John 19.25-27

3. Robert Kysar, *John : The Maverick Gospel*, Rev. ed.. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), p62.

think of Jesus' interaction with his mother and the Beloved disciple at the cross, and how divine love is expressed in human terms throughout the Gospel.⁴

In his allusion to Galatians 6.2, I wonder if James remembers more of the Bible than he admits. If Paul exhorts the Galatians to "bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ", I suspect James and his partner are close to fulfilling that law.

Through James' question about someone who has experienced death, I am drawn to Paul's assertion "in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."⁵ By bringing my attention to Jesus' resurrection as a precursor to the future for all Christians, James stumbles upon a central claim of the Gospel for Paul.⁶ Lying in his hospital bed, he reminds me of Mark's account of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law, where ἡγειρεν αὐτὴν κρατήσας τῆς χειρὸς (lit. "he raised her, having taken the hand"). With ἐγειρω being the same word Paul uses for resurrection, James has for me somehow fused Paul's rhetoric with the Gospel narrative. The result is tears on my part, but also a deepening of my faith.

I leave my encounter with James humbled, aware that he has drawn me into a deeply biblical conversation and experience, despite the impression institutional Christianity might have given him. I am aware of the poignancy that it is his approaching death that has enabled this life-giving meeting to take place.

4 The Broader Context

James has grown up witnessing rapid changes in attitudes towards queer people. In the UK, less than fifty years have passed between the decriminalisation of male homosexuality and the Same Sex Marriage Act in 2013. In the 2021 UK Census, 3.2% of adults over 18 years of age identified as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Other, totalling about 1.5 million people.⁷ Although the percentage of non-heterosexual individuals varies by location, queer people are present in every region, context, age group, social class, religion, and ethnicity.

It is harder to quantify James' preference for polyamory and open relationships as a result of varying definitions. However, these concepts are gaining awareness and positive media representation.⁸ This has led to more people, both straight and queer, acknowledging that non-

4. Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life : A Theology of John's Gospel* / Craig R. Koester. (Grand Rapids, Mich. ; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), p110.

5. 1 Cor 15.20

6. 1 Cor 15.3-8;12-18; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible ; v. 32 (New Haven, Conn. ; Yale University Press, 2008), p545

7. Lina Jovaisaite, "2021 Census: What Do We Know about the LGBT+ Population?," January 16, 2023, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/2021-census-what-do-we-know-about-the-lgbt-population/>.

8. Jennifer Wilson, "How Did Polyamory Become So Popular?," *The New Yorker*, December 25, 2023, accessed May 22, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/01/01/american-poly-christopher-gleason-book-review-more-a-memoir-of-open-marriage-molly-roden-winter>.

exclusive relationships can enhance sexual and emotional intimacy and overall quality of life.⁹

Whilst it is equally difficult to gauge how representative James' interest in BDSM and the London kink scene is, there has been significant growth in research on BDSM since the late 1990s. This research supports the positive perception of these interests.¹⁰ Similarly, there is a growing awareness of men seeking anonymous sex with men as an element of queer culture, with numerous scholarly and popular studies on cruising and the hook-up scene.¹¹

Consequently, while it is not possible to quantify how representative James' self-description as a "Queer Polyamorous Kinkster" is, he represents a broader phenomenon. Therefore, any Christian response to his sexuality should not dismiss him lightly.

5 How the Church of England Responds to People Like James

The Church of England responds to people like James and the queer lives he represents in three main ways: hostility, erasure, grudging and conditional toleration. None of these approaches seriously engage with James' personal experiences or the wider phenomenon he represents. Whilst response has its own unique weaknesses, in the space available I will focus on how their failure to take queer lives seriously relates to their use of Scripture and tradition.

5.1 Hostility

The first response, hostility, is one that James encountered directly from his parish priest as a teenager. Although such pastorally inept responses are, I hope, rare, outright hostility to queer relationships and sex persists. These responses often appeal to classic texts condemning homosexual activity (e.g. Romans 1.26-27), emphasising authorial intent or a unified sexual ethic in scripture that privileges lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage.¹² They also appeal to tradition, asserting that sexual intimacy has consistently found its only proper within cis-heterosexual marriage (e.g., the marriage service preface stating "marriage is a gift of God in creation through

9. Claire Cohen, "Brits' Sex Lives Revealed: What Goes on in the Nation's Bedrooms," May 22, 2024, accessed May 22, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sex-lives-revealed-2024-uk-confessions-jm23hfc5>; Naomi Larsson Piñeda and As told to Naomi Larsson Piñeda, "This Is How We Do It: 'Our Open Marriage Has Strengthened the Sexual Connection between Us'," *The Guardian: Life and style*, June 8, 2024, 11:00 a.m., accessed June 9, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/article/2024/jun/08/this-is-how-we-do-it-our-open-marriage-has-strengthened-the-sexual-connection-between-us>

10. Brandy L. Simula, "Pleasure, Power, and Pain: A Review of the Literature on the Experiences of BDSM Participants," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 3 (2019): e12668, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12668>; Arien K. Muzacz, "Expressions of Queer Intimacy: BDSM and Kink as Means of Self-Actualization," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, June 10, 2021, 00221678211022638, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211022638>

11. e.g. Jack Parlett, *The Poetics of Cruising : Queer Visual Culture from Whitman to Grindr* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2022., 2022); Jeremy Atherton Lin, *Gay Bar : Why We Went Out* (London : Granta, 2021., 2021)

12. Richard B Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament : Community, Cross, New Creation : A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics / Richard B. Hays*. (London: Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1997., 1997), pp379-406.

which husband and wife may know the grace of God”.¹³ Some also appeal to reason, linking sexual intimacy exclusively to heterosexual marriage due to its connection with procreation and child-rearing. However, such an appeal to natural law is more characteristic of Roman Catholic approaches.

5.2 Erasure

The second response, erasure, generally accepts the scriptural and traditional arguments of those hostile to queer relationships, but seeks to create spaces where queer people, both lay and ordained, can exist and flourish quietly, without being open about their sexuality. These hidden environments have a long history in the Church of England and it is ironic that while secular commentators lament the loss of queer spaces, the Church continues to maintain them, albeit discreetly.¹⁴

5.3 Grudging and Conditional Toleration

The third response, grudging and conditional toleration, is gaining traction in the Church of England, despite the complex path towards its implementation. This view holds scripture in the same regard as the first two responses, but also appeals to broader scriptural themes of human flourishing. In this approach texts traditionally condemning homosexual activity are often reinterpreted (e.g., the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis) or argued to be irrelevant to modern faithful relationships (e.g., Romans 1.26-27).¹⁵ The Church’s draft Prayers for Love and Faith reflect the grudging nature of toleration by both explicitly rejecting the term “marriage” for queer relationships, preferring “covenanted friendships”.¹⁶ Their conditionality is observed in that only certain queer relationships (i.e. the ones that look sufficiently similar to idealised heterosexual relationships, with the exception of genitalia) are envisaged.

5.4 Problems Common to Each Response

5.4.1 Appealing to Scripture

When seeking to claim a strong biblical witness for claiming that heterosexual marriage is the only proper place for sexual intimacy or that any acceptance of queer relationships must be based

13. “Marriage,” The Church of England, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/marriage>.

14. cf Diarmuid Hester, *Nothing Ever Just Disappears : Seven Hidden Histories* (UK : Allen Lane, 2023., 2023); Martin Stringer, “Of Gin and Lace: Sexuality, Liturgy and Identity among Anglo-Catholics in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” in *Christianity*, ed. Stephen Hunt (Farnham: Farnham : Ashgate, 2010., 2010); Charles Ledbetter, “Sexuality and Informal Authority in the Church of England,” *Theology* 120, no. 2 (March 2017): 112–121, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X16676676>

15. e.g. Robert K. Gnuse, “Seven Gay Texts: Biblical Passages Used to Condemn Homosexuality,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45, no. 2 (May 1, 2015): 68–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107915577097>

16. The Archbishops’ Council, “Prayers of Love and Faith,” Prayers of Love and Faith, 2023, pp2-3, accessed June 6, 2024, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/prayers-of-love-and-faith.pdf>.

on some degree of conformity to a heterosexual ideal, one encounters far more problems than those often admitted by the proponents of such positions.

Firstly, the long and complex history of textual evidence, passed between readers and communities over centuries, makes it questionable whether recovering the “original” authorial meaning is possible.¹⁷

Secondly, even if possible, focussing on the author’s original intent is a modern enterprise emerging from nineteenth-century biblical criticism. Luther’s exegesis of Habakkuk 2.1 (“the righteous will live by faith”) profoundly impacted Western Christianity, despite the original Hebrew meaning being the opposite of what Luther believed. As Barton notes, “if the validity of a theological position is assumed to depend on a historically informed reading of Scripture, then [even] the doctrine of justification by faith lacks a secure foundation.”¹⁸

Third, and most importantly, such claims assume a unified underlying biblical theology and ethics, despite the diverse voices, genres, and cultures, and the timescale over which the texts were written. This makes such an assumption unconvincing.¹⁹ That a unified ethics is even difficult to discern even when a particular biblical author such as Paul appeals to a single overarching principle such as love makes such claims even harder to accept.²⁰

Whilst I wouldn’t say all such attempts to do so are deeply dishonest (as Bentley Hart does), I agree with Boyarin that attempts to render coherence in the Pauline Epistles start from theological, ethical, or political points rather than emerging “scientifically” from the text.²¹ This explains why some, like Hays, see monogamous lifelong heterosexual unions as central to the New Testament, whilst others can view the same texts as hostile to heteronormative relationships.²²

The consequence of failing to admit that any systematic biblical theology or ethical principles must be based on a preexisting hermeneutic, all sides of the sexuality “debate” in the Church of England fail to take queer lives seriously.

17. Michael W. (Michael William) Holmes, “‘From “Original Text” to ‘Initial Text’: The Traditional Goal of New Testament Textual Criticism in Contemporary Discussion’,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, 2nd ed., ed. Bart D Ehrman and Michael W. (Michael William) Holmes (Leiden: Leiden, 2013), p239.

18. John Barton, *The Word : On the Translation of the Bible* (London: Allen Lane, 2022., 2022), p182.

19. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament : Community, Cross, New Creation : A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* / Richard B. Hays., pp1-7.

20. Adela Yarbro Collins, “Ethics in Paul and Paul in Ethics,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 142, no. 1 (March 15, 2023): 6–21, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1421.2023.1b>.

21. David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved : Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, 2019), pp161-162; Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew : Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Contraversions ; 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p1

22. Dale B. Martin, “Familiar Idolatry and the Christian Case against Marriage,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred : Sources for Theological Reflection* / Edited by Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas. 2nd ed., ed. Marvin Mahan Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville, Ky.: Louisville, Ky. : Westminster John Knox Press, c2010., 2010), pp412-425.

5.4.2 Appealing to Tradition

Like the claims made for scripture, all three responses also rest to a greater or larger extent that regardless of the gender of the couple, on the claim that tradition bears consistent witness to heteronormative relationships are a “gift of God in creation”. In other words, relationships viewed in such terms are normative for Christians at all times and in all contexts. Such claims deserve to be regarded with suspicion for the following reasons.

Claiming that the Bible sets out a unified sexual ethic that cannot change over time stretches credibility, even if such an ethic exists in Scripture, since many central Christian concepts either need to be read out of biblical texts or show historical development through tradition.

For example, creation ex-nihilo, which directly contradicts Genesis 1.1-2, is yet considered a biblically compelled piece of metaphysical theology due to the necessity of doing justice to God’s sovereignty and freedom.²³ Similarly, concepts like sin and repentance have discernible histories within Christian tradition, informed by but distinct from biblical texts.²⁴ Even apparently stable concepts like divine grace, viewed as a perfect divine gift, have complex histories, e.g. Barclay demonstrates at least six ways in which this gift can be conceived, influencing theologians from the ancient world to the twentieth century.²⁵

Claiming that Christian beliefs about sexual relationships have not and cannot change over time is not credible when central doctrines show significant evidence of change and development, and only serves to make it more and more difficult to rebut those who claim that Christian theology is no more than “an arbitrary sexual theory with divine implications”.²⁶ That even the Bible itself can demonstrate sudden transformational change that affected all aspects of society, albeit under a conservative veneer, makes such a task even more difficult.²⁷

Once again, in failing to admit such points, both sides of the sexuality “debate” in the Church of England fail to take queer lives seriously.

23. Janet M. Soskice, “Creatio Ex Nihilo: Its Jewish and Christian Foundations,” in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, ed. David B. Burrell et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511778063.004>.

24. See David Konstan, *The Origin of Sin : Greece and Rome, Early Judaism and Christianity* / David Konstan. (London : Bloomsbury Academic, 2022., 2022) and David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical : Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture* / David A. Lambert. (New York : Oxford University Press, [2016]., 2016)

25. John M. G Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, Michigan : Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015., 2015), pp66-183.

26. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000), p87.

27. Bernard M Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

6 Towards a Way Forward

There is insufficient space to fully detail how the Church of England could engage seriously with people like James, rather than condemning, erasing, or coopting him into an alien lifestyle. However, as a result of reflecting upon my encounter with James, it is possible to suggest some features that the Church should exhibit if it seriously wishes to pursue such an engagement.

Firstly, it would be a Church that responds to tradition and Scripture with integrity, treating both with the honour they richly deserve, but also avoiding claims for either that simply cannot be sustained without honesty concerning the lenses through which either are interpreted. It would be a Church which openly admits the fact that whilst Scripture and Christianity overlap, they are not coterminous.²⁸ As such, it would not be a Church that wastes time creating artificial conflicts between Scripture, tradition and reason.

Secondly, it would be a Church that demonstrates integrity with regard to sex, one in which there is no need for covert or semi-covert queer spaces, but also a Church in which it is possible both to actually talk about sex and relationships honestly, regardless of sexuality or relationship type. It would therefore be a church in which we can think deeply and openly about matters of faithfulness and fidelity, but also of trust and power, without a culture of secrecy and dishonesty that contributes to abuse.²⁹ It might even be a Church in which we can travel toward a genuinely Christian sexual ethic, rather than resorting to knee-jerk responses. It would therefore be a Church that openly and proudly acknowledges that the Body of Christ is, always has been, and always will be queer: a church that no longer offers its children a stone when they cry out for bread.

7 Conclusion

Whether consciously or not, James is a young man who thinks and speaks in deeply biblical and theological terms. However, his sexuality and sexual relationships are not taken seriously by the Church of England despite the fact that both are marked by love, tenderness, and personal fulfilment. All that James can expect from the Church is one of knee-jerk hostility, erasure, or a form of grudging toleration conditional on his acquiescence with externally imposed norms. On pastoral grounds alone, there is a good case to be made for responding differently to this dying young man. That James represents a significant social trend in the society we are called to serve makes this pastoral case for responding seriously to queer lives even stronger.

However, engaging constructively with the sexuality and relationships of people like James would also involve the Church being fully honest about the way it engages with both Scripture and tra-

28. Barton, *The Word : On the Translation of the Bible*, p27.

29. "The Anglican Church - Safeguarding in the Church of England and the Church in Wales - Investigation Report," October 6, 2020, 11:19 a.m. (+01:00), p81, accessed June 11, 2024, <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/anglican-church-safeguarding-church-england-and-church-wales-investigation-report.html>.

dition. Such a task would require courage, but doing so would allow us to finally talk about sex and sexuality in a manner that is genuinely constructive, which would in turn contribute positively to our moral and theological integrity. It might even aid us to avoid the mistakes of the past, not least the scandal of abuse, which we are still yet to even begin dealing with appropriately.

Consequently, on all these grounds, it is imperative that the Church of England begins to take queer lives seriously.

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Angie Smith

Mutuality or marginalization: What effect have the 5 guiding principles had on the vocation of women?

Paper for discussion – Angie Smith

Mutuality or marginalization: What effect have the 5 guiding principles had on the vocation of women?

Across the Church of England this year we have celebrated the anniversary of 30 years since women were ordained priest. Last Saturday the liturgy we used in Winchester Cathedral included the lamenting and repenting of times where women's voices have been muted, vocation has been obstructed or denied, reminding us that there still is sexism and discrimination in the church as in society. But in the same liturgy we also affirmed in a beautiful sung litany written for the service, the place of female biblical characters and historical figures in the salvation story arc, who we walk in the company of. In the 2014 House of Bishops Declaration it acknowledges that 'matters might need to be considered afresh in the light of experience and new developments' (39¹). So, were the 5 Guiding Principles just the starting point and is this the time to reconsider them? In the interests of transparency, I currently lead an all female clergy team (4 of us) and the retired priest who plays an active role in church life was one of those ordained 30 years ago.

The 5 Guiding Principles agreed by the House of Bishops are intended to be a basis for 'mutual flourishing', for ordained women and those who theologically disagree with their ministry both to flourish. The biblical understanding of flourishing is, according to Rev Dr Isobel Hamley, usually associated with the idea of bearing fruit and is therefore directed outside of the self². She observes that while it is often described as the 'good life' it is contrasted with the life of the wicked, and that it is often set against a life of adversity. Biblical flourishing she suggests contains both promise and challenge but unlike our current social fixation with individual freedom and happiness, benefits others. John 10:10, the scripture so often the root of church vision statements (including one of mine!) paints a picture of abundance, or fullness that can be found through life in Jesus. What is this plenty though? A deep sense of shalom, wellbeing, peace that is not contingent on our circumstances or surroundings but is 'what we find when we walk through this imperfect world with God'³. It is cruciform, again it involves loss and gain. Following Jesus is the vocational task of all disciples, a calling not solely for the ordained or for bishops, but for all who he has come to. We could therefore understand 'flourishing' as the living out of vocation, of being the person you are called to be. Can we mutually flourish when the theological convictions of one prevents the vocation of another to be fully realised? When the call of God is thwarted by another? For example when a person in my parish, a soul who I have been given the care of, refuses my sacramental ministry (or even suitable provision I make for them), my vocation is limited, curtailed, I am not flourishing. When a person stopped attending church the day I was licenced, my vocation to make and grow disciples is a barrier to their discipleship, and fails to be fully realised.

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/gs-misc-1076-women-in-the-episcopate.pdf>

² Rev Dr Isobel Hamley at NADAWM Conference May 2022

³ibid

Paul in his letter to the Galatians exhorts them to serve each other in love (Galatians 5: 13). In contrast to the life governed by human desires which is discordant and abusive, the fruit the spirit will bear in them will enable the flourishing of the life of the community, they will bless those other than those in whom they are manifest. The fruits of the spirit are not generated from work, they are not to do with productivity, but to do with the absence of that which restricts growth and the removal of barriers to allowing God to be at work. In the Beatitudes Jesus describes those whose disposition shows God's work in them. The greek *makarios* for blessed is distinctively different from the happiness written of by Greek philosophers, *eudaimonia*. Blessedness or flourishing, can only be derived from God and is a state of being which makes sense in the kingdom of heaven. So too are the fruits of the spirit which are observable and signifiers of a culture. Paul writes in the context of the brutal Roman Empire and calls for a society that practices a way of gentleness, for example. Maybe in the context of mutual flourishing we might consider that peace (shalom) by its very definition cannot exist separate from justice. So, the way the community structures itself and prescribes its relationships enables the fruits to flourish or not.

Bishops have been traditionally a focus for unity in their Diocese, inhabiting their ministry with theological integrity but in a way that allows the clergy to receive pastoral support and care from them. The 5 Guiding Principles allows for some to seek alternative episcopal oversight whilst also stating that the female bishop they object to is the 'true and lawful holders of the office which they occupy and thus deserve due respect and canonical obedience'⁴. This has produced a church which is not unified, where Bishops are no longer a locus of unity but division and women bishops are prevented from exercising their episcopal ministry. One female diocesan bishop described how she takes the initiative and invites a 'flying bishop' to licence a new society incumbent, but observes it all from her diocesan Bishop's seat in the church to be clear that it is her jurisdiction. Another does not attend the 'alternative' Chrism Mass, metaphorically shaking the dust from her feet in the place where she is unwelcome (Matthew 10:14). Neither the bishops nor those with other theological convictions are participating fully in the church, and cannot be said to be enjoying the 'highest possible degree of communion'⁵. Is mutuality really possible or have we made provisions that while allowing women's episcopal ministry also push it to the margins? Perhaps those who disagree feel *they* are marginalized or draw closer to their sympathisers and withdraw from the wider church.

The church, Paul says to the Ephesians, is the way the manifold wisdom of God will be made known (Ephesians 3:10). The church then is the representation of God, demonstrating his character, his views, his heart to the world. In the same way that in priesthood the individual becomes the 'God' person in the community, incarnating and fleshing out who he is, the church, the institution and not just the building, does the same. Representation not only signals God to those outside it but also to those within its structures, even to those who are part of the institution. If it is the institution who ordains in the name of God, then when the institution does not affirm ministry, or recognise vocation or see discrimination then it can be read spiritually as God's view. As in the thinking of many victims, seeds of guilt and doubt are sown, dissonance is felt and confidence is undermined. The Bishop's

⁴ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/gs-misc-1076-women-in-the-episcopate.pdf>

⁵ Ibid

Declaration calls for reciprocity, 'rejoicing in each other's partnership and co-operating to the maximum possible extent in mission and ministry'⁶. A Church Times article described how Bishop Jill Duff had laid hands on Welsh Bishop David Morris when he was consecrated in Bangor Cathedral despite their different views and practice on human sexuality⁷. Bishop Jill said her attendance was representing the Church of England in an attempt to 'find reconciliation and finding a positive way forward' in a relationship between the Welsh and English church that has not always been good. 'Who am I, as an English bishop to judge a Welsh bishop?' she said. Is this, albeit over another issue, an example of reciprocity? Joy being taken in the flourishing of another through a vocational call?

Ten years on might it be time to reconsider mutual flourishing? Do we have a clearer picture now of what flourishing looks like in priestly and episcopal ministry than we did in 2014? Who might we listen to if we asked the question – what does flourishing look like for women and for men? Should we even start with what we want and ask first what does God require? Bishop Rose Hudson Wilkins quoted Maya Angelou's poem 'Caged Bird'⁸ in her recent address to WATCH. It is deeply evocative, contrasting the free bird who 'dares to claim the sky' and the trapped bird in a narrow cage, with wings clipped and feet tied. Birds are made by God to fly, called to demonstrate his glorious creation and so are we. There is an expansiveness in the free bird, which has an echo of the kingdom of heaven with its possibilities and mystery.

Who are we to 'clip' or 'tie' each other, or even to define what flourishing looks like for someone else? As in the assisted dying debate value and quality in life is a subjective judgement. This will apply to other minority groups that the church is becoming alert to: black and minority ethnic, neurodiverse, LGBTQIA+. To ask the question though is also to commit to hear the answer too.

In conclusion I consider that the 5 Guiding Principles have created a fragile system to enable women to be ordained bishops. Neither they nor those who cannot accept their ministry could be considered to be flourishing by the biblical understanding of the term and neither are fully participating in the body of the Christ that is the church. Though a safe route has been created, it appears that justice was sacrificed for peace and it may have set a precedent to resolve other issues that threaten to divide the church. Ironically those who are least marginalized are men who are happy to accept the ministry of women of all orders and as the marginalized are pushed to the edges the majority in the centre remain powerful. However, it could be argued that everyone is diminished when one group is unable to flourish and so re-examining mutual flourishing is in everyone's interests .

⁶ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/gs-misc-1076-women-in-the-episcopate.pdf>

⁷ Church Times 17th May 2024

⁸ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird>

Chrys Tremththanmor

***Do I Bear Guilt for the Holocaust?
Personal and Institutional Sin***

Do I Bear Guilt for the Holocaust?

Personal and Institutional Sin

Revd Canon Chrys Tremththanmor

*The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.*¹

Numbers 14: 18

Introduction

My mother's father was a Nazi.

After that bold a statement, perhaps I had better explain. My maternal grandfather was born in Berlin, and lived his entire life there. He inherited a pharmacy from his father, which was located in that city. According to my maternal grandmother, during the Nazi period he was told that he had to join the party or his business would be taken away from him. As he had a wife and two children to support, he became a member of the Nazi party.

When I was a teenager, going to my high school in California, our history class reached World War II. Our teacher, knowing a bit about my family background, asked if my grandmother could come to the school and, through me as interpreter, recount the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. My grandmother declined, but she did let me interview her (she lived with us) and I delivered a lesson based on my notes.

Only after this session did we cover the Holocaust. And my classmates, having heard the story of my grandfather and the Nazi party, shunned me for quite some time afterwards. I was myself accused of being a 'Nazi' and held guilty by association. Although this eased off, as is common with teenage obsessions, I have never forgotten how I was blamed for a decision taken by my grandfather.

Last year, whilst doing research into our family history, an old family document was unearthed regarding my father's family. We discovered that his father had been conscripted into the German Army during WWII, and that our paternal grandfather had been a guard at the Jewish ghetto in Lodz and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. After the war, when the family tried to cross into West Germany in order to board a ship to take them to the USA, my grandfather was arrested and tried for war crimes. He was eventually set free, but the process took nine months. Am I also guilty for the actions of my paternal grandfather?

Blaming individuals for the deeds of those with whom they are associated, whether that be one's family or a nation, has a long and ongoing history. In this essay, I shall first look at whether the Christian church (Protestant and Catholic) is, due to historical anti-Semitism, guilty for facilitating the Nazis in carrying out the persecution of the Jews. I will then move

¹ The *New Revised Standard Version* translation will be used throughout this paper.

on to the more recent concerns about the slave trade, and the Church of England's proposals regarding reparations. Should the iniquity of the fathers rest upon future generations?

The Church and Anti-Semitism

Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'

Matthew 27: 25

Even in the New Testament we can read of the growing divide between those who would come to call themselves 'Christians' and those who were Jews. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:15 of the 'veil' over Jewish minds 'whenever Moses is read'. As Christianity became more powerful, theologians such as Melito of Sardis, in the second century CE, could write of the crucifixion, 'The Lord is insulted, God has been murdered, the King of Israel has been destroyed by the right hand of Israel.'² This was followed by John Chrysostom delivering sermons against the Jews (c 350 – 407 CE), accusing them of being 'Christ-killers'.³

In the early medieval period, mass killings of Jews began. During the First Crusade in 1096, violence was carried out against both Christian heretics and Jews. Thomas Aquinas added further arguments to condemn Jews. 'They beheld the blatant signs of his divinity, but they corrupted them out of hatred and jealousy of Christ.'⁴

Jews were expelled from many countries: England in 1290, France in 1306, Spain in 1492. In 1543, Martin Luther suggested that the remaining Jews should have their synagogues, schools, homes, and religious books destroyed. Rabbis were to be banned from teaching. If Jews wouldn't work willingly for Christians, then they should be ejected. 'God's anger with them is so intense that gentle mercy will only tend to make them worse and worse.'⁵

The Church and the Holocaust

Luther's anti-Semitic writings had sunk into obscurity over time. The Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher resurrected them, promoting Luther as a spiritual patron of Nazism.⁶ Many of those who supported the persecution of Jews in the German territories, or did nothing to prevent it, were at least cultural Christians and many were baptised church-goers. How did the leaders of the Churches respond?

At the time, Pope Pius XII sat on the throne in Rome. Although in a 1942 broadcast he did speak out about 'those hundreds of thousands who... by reason of their nationality or their race, are marked down for death or gradual extinction', he never specifically denounced the Nazi persecutions nor the Holocaust.⁷ He also assisted in the deportation of Jews from Rome in September 1943, earning the thanks of the German ambassador.

² Melito of Sardis, *On the Pascha*, 96, quoted by Waddell, *Broken Gospel*, pg 15

³ St John Chrysostom, *Sermons against the Jews*, 1.6.3, quoted by Waddell, *Broken Gospel*, pg 15

⁴ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3.47.5m quoted by Waddell, *Broken Gospel*, pg 18

⁵ Martin Luther, *On the Jews and their Lies*, Parts 11-13, quoted by Waddell, *Broken Gospel*, pg 21

⁶ Peter M Waddell, *Broken Gospel? Christianity and the Holocaust*, pg 21

⁷ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning*, pg 54

The Protestant churches, on the whole, also co-operated with the Third Reich. The Catholic Church began, from April 25 1933, to disclose information from baptismal and marriage records to assist the German government in restricting Jewish access to education. In November 1935, the Protestant churches began to provide similar information.⁸

Some notable Christians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, did express concern about Nazi efforts to bar Jewish converts from taking on ordained roles in the Church. However, the 'Confessing Church' was more concerned about opposing the subordination of the Church to the State than protecting Jews. 'One could be a good Confessing Christian and remain wholly signed up to Nazi militarism, the Führer principle and violent anti-Semitism—and many were.'⁹ The emphasis was on the Church making her own internal decisions, such as regarding ordination, but the State existed in order to secure law and order, and therefore had the right to make decisions about issues such as the place of Jews in society. 'It was never a fight directed against the Nazi state, although a very few radicals might have wished that it were.'¹⁰

In summary, the Churches, both Catholic and Protestant, did little to protect Jews from the Nazi regime. Historical anti-Semitism fed into the attitudes of many Christians and led to the persecution and mass extermination of Jewish people in Europe. In 1998 the Vatican issued an apology over the Holocaust.¹¹ Some Protestant churches have also taken responsibility for not protecting Jews.¹²

The Church and Slavery Reparations

Should Churches accept guilt for other atrocities committed in the past? In particular, should the Church of England make apologies and offer restitution for slavery?

In recent years, and with a sharpened focus following the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, institutions in Britain have been reviewing their connections with the historical slave trade. As noted by one author, 'The historical claim is that the exploitation of generations of the [Caribbean] islands' inhabitants under slavery and colonialism wronged those people while enriching Britain—and crucially, that as we are the inheritors of these riches, so present generations in the Caribbean are inheritors of relative poverty.'¹³

Blacks in Britain, particularly those who are descended from Caribbean immigrants, also press for recognition of what they view as continued racism. France-Williams based a book on the many ways in which the Church of England still discriminates against people of

⁸ Anthony J. Sciolino, *The Holocaust, the Church, and the Law of Unintended Consequences*, pgs 107-108

⁹ Peter M Waddell, *Broken Gospel? Christianity and the Holocaust*, pg 53

¹⁰ Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust*, pg 26

¹¹ Holy See: Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/we-remember-a-reflection-on-the-shoah-2481>, accessed 06 May 2024

¹² World Jewish Congress, *Dutch Protestant Church apologizes for failing to protect Jews during Holocaust*, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/dutch-protestant-church-apologizes-for-failing-to-protect-jews-during-holocaust-11-3-2020>, accessed 06 May 2024

¹³ Michael Banner, *Britain's Slavery Debt: Reparations Now!*, pg 15

colour. 'The apparitions of a British imperial yesteryear are so powerfully resonant that one can be triggered into shock in an instant when one least expects it.'¹⁴ Racism, it is said, holds people of colour back from having their talents recognised and thus they are denied opportunities and success.

Some researchers argue against the idea that Britain's wealth is based on slavery. 'Colonialism and the slave trade made, at best, minor contributions to the West's economic development, and they may well have been net lossmakers.'¹⁵ Regardless of the amount of profit slavery may have generated, many would argue that the practice was in of itself evil and restitution is required.

In 2023 the Church Commissioners published the results of an investigation into the Church of England's links to slavery.¹⁶ The review focussed on 'Queen Anne's Bounty', which is part of the origins of the Church's perpetual endowment fund. The conclusion was that through the Bounty's investment in the South Sea Company, which purchased and transported slaves, as well as benefactions received from individuals who derived incomes from slavery, the endowment fund did benefit from the transatlantic slavery trade.

As a result, the Church of England announced that £100 million of funding would be allocated 'to invest for a better and fairer future for all, particularly for communities affected by historic slavery.'¹⁷ An independent Oversight Group challenged this as being inadequate and recommended that the amount be increased to £1 billion. 'Impact investments into Black-led businesses can generate returns that would replenish and enable funding to be deployed to relevant causes in the African diaspora, ideally in perpetuity.'¹⁸

Arguments against the level of guilt and the amount of restitution have been raised. Ian Paul has pointed out that the South Sea Company transported 34,000 slaves out of a total of approximately 12.5 million. Its involvement in the slave trade ran for twenty-four years, between 1715 to 1739, and the profit to the Bounty only amounted to around 3%. In addition, looking at our current day, ONS data examining educational performance lists Chinese, Asians, and Black Africans at the top. At the bottom are Black Caribbeans and white working class.¹⁹ Cultures which value hard work and an emphasis on family stability make up the difference, not race.²⁰

The report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, published in 2021, drew controversy for the insistence that 'family breakdown [is] one of the main reasons for poor

¹⁴ A. D. A. France-Williams, *Ghost Ship: Institutional Racism and the Church of England*, pg 8

¹⁵ Kristian Niemietz, *Imperial Measurement: A cost-benefit analysis of Western colonialism*, pg 58

¹⁶ Church Commissioners for England, *Church Commissioners' Research into Historic Links to Transatlantic Chattel Slavery*

¹⁷ Press release, Church of England, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-commissioners-publishes-full-report-historic-links-transatlantic>, accessed 06 May 2024

¹⁸ Oversight Group to the Church Commissioners' Board of Governors, *Recommendations to the Board of Governors: Healing, Repair and Justice*

¹⁹ Nerys Roberts and Paul Bolton, *Educational outcomes of Black pupils and students*, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9023/CBP-9023.pdf>, accessed 06 May 2024

²⁰ Ian Paul, <https://anglican.ink/2024/03/08/should-the-church-generate-a-1-billion-fund-for-slavery-reparations/>, accessed 06 May 2024

outcomes' and 'an unexplored approach to closing disparity gaps was to examine the extent individuals and their communities could help themselves through their own agency, rather than wait for invisible external forces to assemble to do the job.'²¹ The chair of the committee, Tony Sewell, repeated these points in his book *Black Success*. He argues that although racism does exist, disparities stem more from other factors such as education and health. He has campaigned for giving all children from deprived backgrounds, whatever their heritage, challenge and support.²²

Conclusion

In the summer of 2023, I discovered that a change in German law meant that, through my mother and maternal grandfather, I am eligible for German citizenship. I submitted the documentation for my 'Acquisition of German citizenship by declaration' to the London German Embassy that November. Taking on German citizenship is my way of acknowledging my personal history, both the good and the ill. The actions of my grandfathers are part of my heritage, but their choices were their own, not mine.

Is there a similar way forward for the Church?

The Caricom Reparations Commission's 'Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice' lists 'Full Formal Apology' first on its list. 'The healing process for victims and the descendants of the enslaved and enslavers requires as a precondition the offer of a sincere formal apology by the governments of Europe.'²³ Repatriation, the resettlement back to their home countries for those transported to the Caribbean by the slave trade, is second on the list. Financial assistance is implied by the third point onwards.

To acknowledge that our predecessors acted in ways which we now deplore does not mean that we are ourselves guilty for their sins. As individuals, the Church, and in wider society, the God whom we worship calls us to seek justice for all, and it can be appropriate to express sorrow for past injustices. Is it an excuse when discussing apologies, or reparations, to say that, 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there'?²⁴ Or is this part of the challenge to reflect on how we live our lives now, wondering for what current injustices future generations will judge us?

In those days they shall no longer say: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of the one who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

Jeremiah 31: 29-30

²¹ Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, Independent Report, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities/foreword-introduction-and-full-recommendations>, accessed 15 May 2024

²² Tony Sewell, *Black Success: The Surprising Truth*, pg 129

²³ Caricom Caribbean Community, *Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice*, <https://caricom.org/caricom-ten-point-plan-for-reparatory-justice/>, accessed 06 May 2024

²⁴ Leslie Poles Hartley, *The Go-Between*, pg 1

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