

# Holy Week 2019 – Easter and our Human Vocation

Rev Canon Dr Mike D Williams

## **Holy Week Talk I - The Bear and the Nun**

“In this world so tempted by despair there may be no other source of hope than trust in the God who has given us his word.”<sup>1</sup>

Who am I? What should I do in life? What is the meaning of life? Humans have been asking themselves those question since the beginning of time. It can feel as Christians in our country that ‘we are like blacksmiths in the world of cars’<sup>2</sup>, looking to be relevant to our neighbour. Each generation needs a new answer. This week I wish to reflect on the question **‘What is the meaning of human life today in the context of the Easter story?’**

I’m going to suggest that our life as Christians and a church is the answer to that question. We make sense of life as humans by pointing to something beyond ourselves - to God. We are able to do that in the light of the story about the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. That story gives us a role to play and it extends beyond the horizon to the Kingdom of God – it allows us to be part of something bigger than ourselves.<sup>3</sup> By finding meaning in that story; by singing a new song and pointing others towards it we are offered an invitation by God to be a human being in a new way.

In these talks I will examine an issue of our modern world and reflect on what it means to point to God under such circumstances – how we can sing a new song to the Lord.

There is a crisis of meaning and high levels of anxiety in our society. We are not sure what story to tell; what stories to listen to and what stories to believe. The importance of stories in life and how they bring meaning is illustrated by the wonderful tale of ‘Watership Down’ by Richard Adams. I will structure each talk in three parts:

1. An extract from Watership Down
2. A reflection on about our world today
3. A theological story/reflection to help us point towards God

This evening we will have a pause part way through our reflection during which Hamish will play a short meditative piece on the organ. He will play a further two pieces at the end.

### **I. Watership Down a story about the importance of stories in life**

What is a story? A Plot that evolves over time; the events that move the story forward and the actors. Narratives: create belonging; create an ought; link actions to outcome: Belonging; Obligation; Causality.

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<sup>1</sup> Radcliffe, T. (1999) Sing a New Song: The Christian Vocation, Dublin, Dominican Publications. p.32

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p.210

<sup>3</sup> Harari Y N (2018) 21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, London, Jonathan Cape. p.276

Watership Down is a children's story about a group of rabbits who decide to leave their burrow and find safety elsewhere. It is a profound tale with depth of meaning for our world today. The Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas uses the story to illustrate that we gain moral insights and meaning from the stories that we tell. I will touch on key parts of the story in each talk to set the scene for our reflection on our human vocation in the light of Easter.

The story begins with the rabbits Buckthorn and Hazel out from their burrow searching for cowslip, a delicacy food. Fiver, Hazel's brother had found some but just as they started eating along came Toadflax and other rabbits of the Owsla. The rabbits from the Owsla are the strong or clever rabbits who surround the Chief Rabbit. Fiver, the smallest and last in a litter of five, and his companions are told to clear off and leave the cowslip to Owsla rabbits. They crossed over the brook and found something unexpected – a new notice board.

“Two piles of earth lay on the grass. Heavy posts, reeking of creosote and paint, towered up as high as the holly trees in the hedge, and the board they carried threw a long shadow across the top of the field. ...Suddenly Fiver shivered and cowered down. ...He began to whimper with fear. Some terrible thing – coming closer and closer.”<sup>4</sup>

Fiver and the other rabbits return to the Burrow. Fiver persuades Hazel that he must warn the Chief Rabbit of the impending danger. He is grudgingly granted an audience. Fiver, the young rabbit with a prophetic message is mocked and ignored by those in power. We know from later in the story that the notice board was about a new housing development that would wipe out the burrow and all the rabbits living there.

Hazel, Dandelion, Pipkin, Fiver and others decide to leave. They are attacked by some of the Owsla as they make their escape. In the midst of the unknown territory on their journey they stop to rest. Dandelion shares a foundational story to overcome their fear and keep them as a cohesive group travelling together through a strange landscape.

“All the rabbits had heard the story before: ...Dandelion was telling it well and even Pipkin forgot his weariness and danger, and remembered instead the great indestructibility of the Rabbits.”<sup>5</sup>

The power of stories creates a sense of belonging, norms of behaviour and an understanding of how the world works. Easter is our story – we have all heard it before, yet the power and message remain undiminished.

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<sup>4</sup> Adams, R. (2014) Watership Down, London, Puffin. p.8.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.37.

Before I share another story about a bear and a nun I would like to delve a bit deeper into the story of our time – the increasing levels of anxiety about our world; a context that is helpful for us to understand as we live out our human vocation in the light of Easter.

## **2. Anxiety – Paul Collier**

Fiver is an example of a prophetic voice, pointing to the dangers that he had intuitively picked up on. The Bible has many examples of prophets warning those in power of impending doom if they did not amend their ways.

In our own context there are many voices and many stories. It is hard to make sense of the complexity of the modern world. Paul Collier, a professor of economics at Oxford has spent most of his career studying the impact of the global economy on the poorest in our world. His most famous book is the *Bottom Billion* – referring to the estimated one billion people who live in extreme poverty today. Last year he turned his attention to the future of capitalism and the impact on society. His opening sentences say this:

“Deep rifts are tearing apart the fabric of our societies. They are bringing new anxieties and new anger to our people, and new passions to our politics. The social bases of these anxieties are geographic, educational and moral. It is the regions rebelling against the metropolis; northern England versus London; the heartlands versus the coast. It is the less educated rebelling against the more educated.”<sup>6</sup>

Whilst capitalism has generated huge benefits there is an increasing cost in terms of social cohesion. Collier argues that the Social Democracies of Europe have lost ground as ideology and or populism make more sense to people.

## **Yuval Noah Harari**

There were three grand narratives during the 20<sup>th</sup> century according to the historian, Yuval Noah Harari. He argues that the global elites in New York, London, Berlin and Moscow created the stories that claimed to explain the past and predict the future of the entire world.<sup>7</sup> The fascist story, the communist story, and the liberal story. The Second World War knocked out the fascist story, and from the late 1940s to the late 1980s the world became a battle ground between the two stories of communism and liberalism. The communist story collapsed. Liberalism with the emphasis on individualism and freedom become the only story in town.

Yet the financial crash of 2008 created widespread disillusionment with the liberal story. Walls are back in vogue. Resistance to immigration and to trade agreements is mounting. Rather than be global players populist leaders seek to retrench into the nation state; ‘Take Back Control’; ‘Make America Great Again’ become the election winning slogans. Strong men and populist leaders are on the rise. Some suggest that liberalisation and globalisation

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<sup>6</sup> Collier, P. (2018) *The Future of Capitalism*, London, Allan Lane. p.3.

<sup>7</sup> Harari, Y.N. *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London, Jonathan Cape, p.3.

has empowered a tiny elite at the expense of the masses. Financial inequalities in the UK and USA have increased in the last ten years.

In 1938 humans had three global stories to choose from, in 1968 just two, in 1998 a single story seemed to prevail; in 2018 we are down to zero, Harari argues. We are left with the task of creating an updated story for the world. Harari asks the question:

“Could traditional religion... provide the answers... could they use ancient wisdom to fashion an up-to-date world view?” p.17

Let us at least try.

### 3. **Bear and the Nun**<sup>8</sup>

If our friends, neighbours and society feel lost, confused and hungry for meaning then it is partly because the stories of modernity no longer make sense of our experience of time, events and what it means to be human. Let me tell you about the Bear and the Nun. This is a story from Timothy Radcliffe when he was living in Rome as the Master of the Dominican Order of Preachers.

#### **First the plot and time**

Around Rome one year there were lots of posters of a large and angry bear. An inscription on the poster read ‘La forza del Prezzo giusto’ – ‘The power of the Right Price’.

Radcliffe suggests that the basic plot of history is one of irresistible progress – human history marches onwards, economic growth is the norm and the market is the foundation of life. Yet, as we know from the analysis by Collier, the global market economy is not a panacea for all ills. Growing economic inequalities within and between countries, 1 billion remain living on less than \$2 a day, drug and alcohol addiction rising and communities in a downward spiral of violence on the streets. In the words of Radcliffe, ‘The bear is irresistible, but it is tearing us to pieces.’<sup>9</sup> The story of the ‘Right Price’ is not leading us to the Kingdom of God. We cannot live without stories. Soaps on our TV fill the gap. Once in America the final episode of a soap opera was watched by 80 million people – we take refuge in fiction.

The most downloaded report by the Sustainable Development Commission is by Tim Jackson that challenges the narrative that economic growth is a necessity for prosperity. It says this:

“The banking crisis of 2008 led the world to the brink of financial disaster and shook the dominant economic model to its foundations. It redefined the boundaries between market and state and forced us to confront our inability to manage the

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<sup>8</sup> Radcliffe., p.210-229

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.213

financial sustainability – let alone the ecological sustainability – of the global economy.

The growth imperative has shaped the architecture of the modern economy. It motivated the freedoms granted to the financial sector. It stood at least partly responsible for the loosening of regulations and the proliferation of unstable financial derivatives. Continued expansion of credit was deliberately courted as an essential mechanism to stimulate consumption growth.

This model was always unstable ecologically. It has now proven itself unstable economically. The age of irresponsibility is not about casual oversight or individual greed. If there was irresponsibility it was systematic, sanctioned widely and with one clear aim in mind: the continuation and protection of economic growth.”<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to the image of the ‘Bear’ Timothy Radcliffe takes us to a monastery of Dominican contemplative nuns near Caracas in Venezuela. He celebrated Easter there. The church was packed with young people.

“We lit the Paschal Candle and placed it on its stand. And a young nun with a guitar sang a love song to the candle... I was completely bowled over by this image, of a young nun singing a love song in the darkness to the new born fire. This image suggested that we are caught up in another drama, another story. This is our story, not that of the angry bear, devouring its rivals.”<sup>11</sup>

The candle bore the words: ‘Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega. All time belongs to him and all ages. To him be the glory and power through every age. Amen.’

This is not a story that relates easily to the global market place today. It is not a story that can speak about the advantage of laying cables across the Atlantic at the cost of \$300m to gain six milliseconds over your rivals in financial trading. No - this is a story of a longer time span, a story from creation to the Kingdom of God; we move out of clock time into God’s time. We are those that live for that Kingdom, where in the words of Julian of Norwich: ‘All will be well, all manner of things will be well.’ There is no meaning unless we are pointing to the Kingdom. We can encounter God in our journey and praise him. Now is that time. It is in Christ that we find peace for the world of the ‘bear’ has been overcome by Easter. (Jn 16.33 Jesus says: *‘I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!’*).

We are not seeking wealth or success in this story. The story is about our relationship with God each day, our relationship with our neighbour each day. Our response of God’s invitation to join the story of the Kingdom; singing praises to the new light of Christ.

*Pause for Organ Music*

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<sup>10</sup> Jackson, T. (2009) ‘Prosperity without growth? London, Sustainable Development Commission.

<sup>11</sup> Radcliffe., p.215

## **Second in our story is the ACTION**

The image of the 'bear' represents the competitive struggle for survival, where the weak perish and the strong thrive. The action that drives history is free competition, freedom to choose what you want. Yet such freedom can prove illusory. It is a freedom that is destroying our planet and communities. We are powerless in the face of such a 'bear'.

The image of the nun represents another story – she praises and celebrates the story of man crushed by the strong but lives forever. This is not about God's strength but his creativity to raise Jesus and transform the lives of those who encounter him. The action is about transformation. *"See I am making all things new... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."* (Rev 21.5f)

How do we witness to this strange story of the God of death and resurrection? Radcliffe suggests to his Religious Order of Dominicans that it is in the presence of the religious who refuse to leave places of death and violence. In the hotspots of violence and abuse of humanity there are those present witnessing to the love of God. It is not just the places of violence that create death. In western Europe many congregations, communities, monasteries and convents must face death. On a visit to a convent that was nearing the end of its life one of the nuns said to Timothy's companion, 'Surely Father, our dear Lord would never let this convent die!' To which the Friar replied, 'He let his son die, didn't he?'

Our encounters with God allow us to help bring new life in unexpected places. There is a story of a Scottish religious who was a poet and wrestler; a rather unusual combination! He had a vision to bring art to prisoners, believing that they needed to connect with their creativity to be healed and move on in life. He first started in Glasgow. He asked the prisoners what they would like to try from painting, poetry, sculpture or dance. Well you might imagine the response. He rolled up his sleeves and said: 'If you think art is not for real men then I will fight him!' They all took classes in painting and poetry!

## **We come thirdly to the ACTORS in our story**

The image of the 'bear, angry and alone. The story of our age of what it means to be a human; a separate and autonomous self, free to choose to meet our wants as well as our needs, yet fundamentally alone. A crisis of loneliness is sweeping this and other wealthy nations as the social bonds fracture. Individualism is the hero of our modern society.

Therein lies the contradiction – we cannot be our 'self' alone – we need community. I'll talk more about community another evening. My point this evening is that the image of the 'nun' tells us that around the Paschal Candle are the crowd of young people; they are the community of the baptised sharing a faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Yet we often fear the commitment of community. Churches, charities and organisations are dying for the lack of those willing to commit to the common good served by coming

together. Individuality makes it hard to rub along with others that have different perspectives and priorities. Radcliffe makes the point that language and reality have come apart. The Church presents herself as a community, yet so little of the communion of community is actually offered. We often stay safe in our churches allowing in only those who follow our rules.

The creativity of God that we point to this Easter is the author of the story that places meaning in community, as witnessed by the Trinity.

### **Summary**

In conclusion let me say a couple of things in relation to my theme that we live our human vocation in the light of Easter:

First, it is hard for us to live lives that point to the story of the Alpha and the Omega. We are the children of the 'bear' story. We live in clock time where milliseconds can make a difference to our pension pot. It is a struggle each day for us as individuals to hold onto that story of new birth given in our Baptism by the creative life of Christ. Part of being a church is the opportunity to share our stories of that struggle, to be inspired and encouraged by others as well as supporting those who ask for help.

Second, that to give voice to a new song in our society we need a suitable ecosystem to support this form of life. Without an ecosystem that sustains our spiritual life of worship, prayer and community we will not thrive. The Christian faith is practical – it takes time and practice. Tomorrow I will develop the idea of a spiritual ecosystem that allows us to flourish and respond creatively to other forms of life.

### **Prayer**

*God of unwavering love, you give us the story above all stories*

*You take us out of clock time into eternity,*

*help us to discern your presence in our world as we journey through life.*

*May you equip us to love our one and amazing life in a way that points to you.*

*We ask this in the name of your Son, our saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen*

## Holy Week Talk 2 – Silence and Honey Cakes

### Introduction

“In this world so tempted by despair there may be no other source of hope than trust in the God who has given us his word.”<sup>12</sup>

This week I’m reflecting on the question ‘**What is the meaning of human life today in the context of the Easter story?**’

I’m boldly suggesting that our life as Christians and a church is the answer to that question. We make sense of life as humans by pointing to something beyond ourselves - to God. We are able to do that in the light of the story about the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. That story gives us a role to play and it extends beyond the horizon to the Kingdom of God – it allows us to be part of something bigger than ourselves.<sup>13</sup> By finding meaning in that story and pointing others towards it we are offered an invitation by God to be a human being in a new way.

Yesterday we considered two images; one of a Bear depicting the global market economy that dominates our world view and the contrasting image of a young nun singing a love song to the Paschal Candle surrounded by young people in a church in Venezuela. I concluded that for us to be able to tell the story in this world of God’s love symbolized in the Paschal Candle we need to consider the ecosystem in which life can exist. My theme today is about the need for ecosystems that allow spiritual and human flourishing.

The structure of each talk is to reflect on three stories; the fictional but insightful story of Watership Down, the story of our changing world and a theological story – today about the potential for transformation under God’s grace and our diversity of spiritual engagement with God.

### I. Watership Down

In the first episode of Watership Down yesterday we heard how a small group of wild rabbits, sensing the danger of human building development, had left their burrow. They ventured through the unknown and dangerous countryside. On route they told themselves ancient rabbit stories which gave them the courage to continue.

In episode two they find a new burrow, home to some very healthy and large rabbits. They are welcomed in. Not all is as they might expect; these new rabbits whilst well fed, are not a cohesive group, they don’t tell the old rabbit stories and there is a sense of something

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<sup>12</sup> Radcliffe, T. (1999) Sing a New Song: The Christian Vocation, Dublin, Dominican Publications. p.32

<sup>13</sup> Harari Y N (2018) 21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, London, Jonathan Cape. p.276

unspoken in the air. Fiver, the young rabbit who is the prophet voice in the group, who sensed the danger of the builders, now picks up on the strangeness of the new burrow.

The next day Fiver is up early and out of the burrow. His big brother Hazel is worried and wakes Bigwig and they go out looking for him. Leaping through a gap in the hedge Bigwig gets caught in a snare. Fiver appears, declaring that this warren is nothing but a death-hole. As the rabbits work to free Bigwig, Fiver tells the story:

“Once there was a fine warren on the edge of the wood, overlooking the meadows of a farm. It was big, full of rabbits. Then one day the white blindness came, and the rabbits fell sick and died. But a few survived. One day the farmer thought, I could increase those rabbits and make them part of my farm – their meat their skins. Why should I bother to keep rabbits in hutches? They’ll do very well where they are. He began to shoot the owls and other predators of the rabbits. He put food out for the rabbits, but not too near the warren. For his purposes he wanted them to be accustomed to going about in the fields and the wood. And then he snared them – not too many so as not to frighten them all away.

...The rabbits became strange in many ways, they knew well enough what was happening. But even to themselves they pretended that all was well, for the food was good, they were protected, they had nothing to fear but the one fear; and that struck here and there, never enough at a time to drive them away. They forgot the ways of wild rabbits. They had no Chief Rabbit...” ...To speak openly of the wires – that was intolerable.”

The ecosystem established by the farmer created the condition for the rabbits to share in the lie that all is well. Well-fed, complacent and powerless.

## 2. Our World

‘The Power of the Powerless’<sup>14</sup> was written in 1978 by Vaclav Havel, the poet, playwright and later after the fall of communism he became president of Czechoslovakia. His book is a meditation on political dissent against the communist regime. The most striking image he provides is of a greengrocer who ‘places in his window, among the onions and carrots, the slogan: ‘Workers of the World, Unite!’ Why does he do it?

Havel explains that the greengrocer has no interest in the semantic content of the slogan – it is a sign containing a subliminal message which can be expressed ‘I the greengrocer, live here and know what I must do. I behave in a manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace.’ The greengrocer is forced to live within a lie that is a state-controlled ideology.

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<sup>14</sup> Havel V. (1979 / 2018) *The Power of the Powerless*, London, Vintage.

Havel considers the wider situation faced by people in democratic countries. His worry is that whilst there is not the state control of life - there is the seductive power of the consumer value system. He says this:

“It would appear that the traditional parliamentary democracies can offer not fundamental opposition to the ...industrial-consumer society, for they, too, are being dragged helplessly along with by it. People are manipulated in ways that are infinitely more subtle and refined than the brutal methods used in post-totalitarian societies. ...the omnipresent dictatorship of consumption, production, advertising, commerce, consumer culture, and all that flood of information...’ cannot be imagined as ‘the source of humanity’s rediscovery of itself.’”<sup>15</sup>

Rowan Williams makes a similar point when discussing the place of contemplative prayer:

“To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.”<sup>16</sup>

The ecosystem of the ‘bear’ appears dominant. Rowan Williams suggests one way in which we may respond and find a way that points beyond the now to the truth of God. Yet to engage with God’s truth means using language about the infinite and transcendent which is never adequate. It is allusive, suggestive, metaphorical, pointing beyond itself and as Frances Young suggests is ‘only able to get near its object by multiplication of images overlaying each other and correcting each other.’ It requires, she argues the ‘willingness to embrace the possibility of truth in paradox.’<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Theological reflection**

Let me give you another image or metaphor for our situation - who in the way we live our lives point towards the meaning of life.

#### **Imaginal Cells**

It starts with a question asked of a Grandma by her six-year old granddaughter. ‘Grandma, do you know what mettyfourmiss means?’ Grandma struggles to understand but eventually gets a glimpse of the question – ‘are you trying to say ‘metamorphosis?’ The Grandma in question is Margaret Silf the great writer on spirituality. She says that if we didn’t have caterpillars, we would have to invent them, as they provide a perfect metaphor of our own spiritual journey – a journey of transformation providing we have the ecosystem that allows that process to take place.

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p136f.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, R. (2017) *Holy Living*, London, Bloomsbury. p.96f

<sup>17</sup> Young, F (2016) *Construing the Cross*, London, SPCK. p.xiii.

A biology lesson will help us with the metaphor. Some cells within the caterpillar, although sharing the same DNA, differ from the majority of the cells; they resonate at a different frequency. They are IMAGINAL cells. They are called that because they hold the blueprint for what will be the butterfly.

Initially they operate independently as single cell organisms. The caterpillar's immune system regards them as a threat and attacks them, drenching them in juvenile hormone to suppress their activation. The imaginal cells persist, multiply and begin to connect together forming clusters. In the chrysalis stage they reach critical mass and function as a multi-cell organism and become the butterfly.

Margaret Silf draws out the implications for us: "Our imaginal cell carries a deeper wisdom that we need if we are to embrace the invitation to transformation that our times are pressing upon us, and for most spiritual traditions seek to prepare us."<sup>18</sup> She asks these questions:

- What if each of us is potentially an imaginal cell, carrying the still hidden seed of the best possible version of who we can become?
- What if each of us carries within us a fragment of the bigger story – the best possible version of humanity we can become on this beautiful planet we call home?
- What if the 'extra-ordinary' is always present and striving to emerge from our own ordinary lives?

In thinking about the ecosystem in which we can live our spiritual lives the metaphor of the butterfly's imaginal cells can remind us of our God given potential. Yet we each have different stories, capacities and potential. One of the beauties of humanity is the diversity of humankind.

### **Silence and Honey Cakes**

Rowan Williams tells some wonderful tales from the early church that help us to understand something of the diversity we experience in our spiritual ecology. Spiritual tourism did not take long to develop in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt. In his book 'Silence and Honey Cakes Rowan tells us about a brother who came to see Abba Arsenius at Scetic:

"He arrived at the church and asked the clergy if he could go and visit Abba Arsenius. 'Have a bite to eat,' they said, 'before you go to see him.' 'No,' he replied, 'I shan't eat anything until I have met him.' Arsenius's cell was a long way off, so they sent a brother along with him. They knocked on the door, and went in and greeted the old man, then sat down; nothing was said. The brother from the church said, 'I'll leave you now; pray for me.' But the visitor didn't feel at ease with the old man and said, 'I'm coming with you.' So off they went together. Then the visitor said, 'Will you take me to see Abba Moses, the one who used to be a highwayman?' When they

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<sup>18</sup> Silf, M. (2017) *Hidden Wings*. London, DLT. p.14ff.

arrived, Abba Moses welcomed them happily and enjoyed himself thoroughly with them until they left.

The brother who had escorted the visitor said to him, 'Well I've taken you to see the foreigner and the Egyptian; which did you like the better?' 'The Egyptian (Moses) for me!' he said. One of the fathers overheard this and prayed to God saying, 'Lord, explain this to me. For your sake one of these men runs from human company and for your sake the other receives them with open arms.' Their two large boats floating on the river were shown to him (by God). In one of them sat Abba Arsenius and the Holy Spirit in complete silence. And in the other boat was Abba Moses, with the angels of God: they were all eating honey cakes."<sup>19</sup>

There is a distinctiveness in how these men expressed their vocation and life before God. Their call and gifts were different; silence and honey cakes are not competing achievements that have to be marked out of ten. The anxiety in the story is from the visitor who finds it hard to cope with the silence and with the eaves-dropping monk who can't reconcile the differences. We need to be sensitive in our ecosystem to the different forms of life; creating the conditions where all can flourish in their expression of faith in God.

Rowan argues that the church should be a community where we can explore those differences, without, as he puts it, 'the expectation of being despised or condemned for not having a standard or acceptable spiritual life.' The challenge Rowan gives from the desert fathers and mothers is not to fall into the conformity of our society by being at once 'deeply individualistic and deeply conformist.'

Consider the paradox – individualism and conformity. We place huge emphasis in our world on the power of the individual – their will and ability to make free choices. Yet the world of choice is heavily managed and even manipulated. There is a pressure to conform – not to stand out from the crowd. The fascination with the human will, and at the same time, the reduction of that will to conform to the choices of the market are a key issue for our world today.

Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky claims that we should distinguish 'with absolute clarity between the individual and the person'. The person is what is utterly unique, irreducible and made by the unique intersection of the relationships in which it is involved; whilst the individual is just this 'example of human nature, something essentially abstract'. As Rowan puts it: "The fact of having choices is a fact about human nature as we experience it, but it is not this that constitutes us as persons.

Later, Rowan suggests that Jesus is the supremely distinctive human being – he is the one in perfect communion with the Father. He does the will of the Father for the salvation of us.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Williams, R (2003) *Silence and Honey Cakes*, Lion, Oxford. p.42f.

Rowan writes: 'Those who live in him by grace are in the process of having their human nature changed as their personal relation with him develops'. In a way our relationship with Jesus is what can bring our imaginal cells into maturity – to be transfigured ourselves; we can relate to others and form clusters that can bring transformation as we point towards God.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Let me draw together the take home thoughts from these comments.

Our theme today is about the need for ecosystems that create the conditions to allow spiritual and human flourishing. We need such an ecosystem to help us answer the question 'What is the meaning of life?' You remember that I'm suggesting that as humans meaning comes from pointing to something beyond ourselves - to God.

Fiver and his colleagues running from danger find shelter in a warren full of well-fed rabbits. They find their hosts unwillingness to articulate the truth of their situation – they are comfortable and choose to collude in the illusion that all was well – each rabbit for themselves and little sense of community or leadership.

Vaclav Havel and Rowan Williams draw something of a parallel to our situation in which we are comfortable and complacent in the face of the individualism and our consumerist society. The metaphor of the imaginal cells helps us consider the potential we each have personally and collectively to be transformed by God's grace. And finally, we considered the depth and diversity of our spiritual vocation and the idea of distinguishing between the individual and what constitutes us as a person.

Tomorrow I will reflect on the sense of identity and how that may help us in the search for meaning in life in the light of Easter.

#### **Prayer**

*Lord God our creator, who gave your son to suffer and die for our redemption and gave us each the potential to point to your kingdom; may you challenge our sense of comfort and illusion that all is well in our world. Transform us with your grace and allow us to flourish in your name. We ask this through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

## Holy Week Talk 3 – Identity and Maypoles

### Introduction

“In this world so tempted by despair there may be no other source of hope than trust in the God who has given us his word.”<sup>20</sup>

This week I’m reflecting on the question ‘**What is the meaning of human life today in the context of the Easter story?**’

I wish to suggest that our life as Christians and a church is the answer to that question. We make sense of life as humans by pointing to something beyond ourselves - to God. We are able to do that in the light of the story about the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. That story gives us a role to play and it extends beyond the horizon to the Kingdom of God – it allows us to be part of something bigger than ourselves.<sup>21</sup> By finding meaning in that story and pointing others towards it we are offered by God an invitation to be human in a new way.

On Monday we considered two images; one of a Bear depicting the global market economy that dominates our world view and the contrasting image of a young nun singing a love song to the Paschal Candle surrounded by young people in a church in Venezuela. I concluded that for us to be able to tell the story in this world of God’s love symbolized in the Paschal Candle we need to consider the ecosystem in which life can exist. Yesterday we reflected on how easy it is to collude and become spiritually complacent in our consumerist society but that we have within us the potential to allow God’s grace to transform us as people and a church; that who we are as persons and our meaning in life is more than the individualism that our context demands of us. As we engage with God we also engage with his people in their diversity and collectively in community.

This evening I wish to explore the idea of identity and how belonging is part of our identity. ‘As thoroughly modern beings, we like to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals who decide what we want, when we want it, and how to get it. René Girard, theologian and philosopher of social science, has made us aware that this is an illusion. We live in relationship to those around us and our desires, attitudes and behaviour are heavily

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<sup>20</sup> Radcliffe, T. (1999) *Sing a New Song: The Christian Vocation*, Dublin, Dominican Publications. p.32

<sup>21</sup> Harari Y N (2018) *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London, Jonathan Cape. p.276

influenced by those relationships. We are constantly influenced by ‘the other’ and are measuring ourselves against them.’<sup>22</sup>

In a culture that is individualistic I like the idea which suggests that we cannot be individuals unless we are part of something greater than ourselves. The Christian story of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection is part of our identity; it provides us with a narrative within which we find meaning, purpose and belonging.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> April the New Statesman held a debate in Cambridge on the topic: ‘This house believes identity politics is an impediment to progress.’ The point they make in setting up the debate is that ‘from the EU referendum to Trump, trans rights to #MeToo, the rise of the far right in Europe to Black Lives Matter in America, identity politics is re-shaping the world. But is defining yourself by your identity – whether gender, sexuality, race, nationality or class – a way of making society a more inclusive place? Or is it a downward slope that leads to polarised debate and political stasis?’

I wish to argue that our identity is much broader than what we find in our current political discussions – it is rooted in our love of God and in relationship with others grounded in that love. It is through recognising that our fundamental identity lies with our creator that we can point others to our common humanity.

This evening I’m taking you on a journey from Watership Down to Maypoles via modern understanding of identity, Facebook and the insights from Jean Vanier about being human.

## **I. Watership Down**

The story of the Rabbits who left Sandleford Warren and eventually established a new warren at Watership Down is about events over time and characters. The ragged band of individual male rabbits who left become a group that look after each other and create the bonds to change the norms of rabbit behaviour. When they arrive at Watership Down they realise that there are no does among them. It is the female does who dig warrens; the bucks, or male rabbits don’t dig. There is a discussion between the leader Hazel and Blackberry. Blackberry recalls that in Cowslip Warren the rabbits did a lot of things that weren’t natural to rabbits – pushing stones into the earth and carrying food underground. They’d altered what rabbits do naturally because they thought they could do better. The challenge is laid down by Blackberry to the leader:

“You say buck rabbits don’t dig. Nor they do. But they could, if they wanted to. Suppose we had deep comfortable burrows to sleep in? ...Then we would be safe. And there is nothing to stop us having them, except that buck rabbits won’t dig. Not can’t – won’t.”

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.spiritualityofconflict.com> accessed 27.3.19

After a time of reflection Hazel, the leader suggests that Blackberry is right. ‘The others were taken aback. Pipkin, readily joined Hazel at the foot of the bank and soon two or three more began scratching at the light soil.’

Our identity can be defined by what our roles and expectations in life are. We can choose to have a narrow definition of our identity; as suggested by the New Statesman; gender, sexuality, political or religious tribe and so on. The story of the rabbits leaving Sandleford Warren as a group of frightened individuals who become bonded as a team, willing to challenge their conventional thinking – they are open minded to the possibilities of the future. They are also open to welcoming the outsider.

As they are digging, they hear a noise of another rabbit. They find “a rabbit in the last stages of exhaustion, its back legs trailing behind its flattened rump, ... It was Captain Holly of the Sandleford Owsla. He was one of those who had attacked them as they fled the warren. Now they learn from Holly that Sandleford has been razed by men and only a few escaped. Yet they accept him and nurse him back to health. He proves his worth for them later in the story. Being open minded creates the conditions for a resilient and successful warren.

The sense of identity for the rabbits of Watership Down evolved as they experienced their journey and settlement into a new warren.

## **2. Francis Fukuyama**

Now I wish to explore our modern sense of identity through the work of Francis Fukuyama’s recent book about contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition.<sup>23</sup>

That there is a difference between one’s inside and one’s outside understanding of self is the foundation of modern ideas about identity. Fukuyama argues that it is Martin Luther who originated the perception of having an inner and outer sense of self. Luther articulated the concept that man has a twofold nature, an inner spiritual one and outer bodily being. Luther is quoted from his work on ‘Christian Liberty’<sup>24</sup> as saying (please allow for the lack of inclusive language):

“Faith alone can rule in the inner man, As Romans 10.10 says. ‘For man believes with his heart and so is justified,’ and since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all’ and that these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with the inner man.”

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<sup>23</sup> Fukuyama, F. (2018) Identity; Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition, London, Profile Books.

<sup>24</sup> Luther, M (1957) Christian Liberty, ed, H J Grimm, Philadelphia, Fortress Press. p.7-8.

Luther advocated an inner self that was free to choose. But it was far from the modern sense of self; it had only one dimension: faith and the acceptance of God's grace. He was not facing a crisis of meaning as he accepted the truth of Christianity.

Secular thinkers have moved the ideas of identity forward since the Reformation. Rousseau in particular argues that society exists outside the individual, a mass of rules, relationships, injunctions, and customs that is itself the chief obstacle to the realization of human potential, and hence of human happiness. Rousseau, like Luther, distinguishes between the inner self and the outer society; a society that demand conformity to rules and conventions. Unlike Luther, Rousseau argues that the inner freedom does not lie in the freedom to choose to accept the grace of God; rather it lies in the natural and universal ability to experience the sentiment de l'existence (feeling of existence), without the limitations of accumulated social convention. This is a turning point in modern culture – a new form of inwardness where we regard ourselves as beings with inner depths. It is from within that inner depth that we make our moral choices.

In summary, Fukuyama suggests that,

“By the early nineteenth century, most of the elements of the modern concept of identity are present: the distinction between the inner and outer selves, the valuation of the inner being above existing social arrangements, the understanding that the dignity of the inner self rests on its moral freedom.”<sup>25</sup>

We have arrived at a situation where modernisation has created complex societies with diverse pluralism in our cities and the technology to allow the like-minded to communicate rapidly with each other. In such a world, argues Fukuyama, lived experiences, and therefore identities, begin to proliferate. Identities are created by groups and not just as individuals. Groups can identify most easily by who they are against in a world of competing ideas and ideologies. Groups can provide a sense of belonging.

Creating a feeling of belonging has been picked up by the tech giants. Here is what the founder of Facebook said in 2017:

“For the past decade, we've focused on making the world more open and connected. We're not done with that. But I used to think that if we just gave people a voice and helped them connect, that would make the world better by itself. In many ways it has. But our society is still divided. Now I believe we have a responsibility to do even more. It's not enough to simply connect the world, we must also work to bring the world closer together.”<sup>26</sup>

He goes further:

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<sup>25</sup> Fukuyama, F. p.40.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/bringing-the-world-closer-together/10154944663901634/> accessed 19.3.19

“We all get meaning from our communities. Whether they're churches, sports teams, or neighbourhood groups, they give us the strength to expand our horizons and care about broader issues. Studies have proven the more connected we are, the happier we feel and the healthier we are. People who go to church are more likely to volunteer and give to charity -- not just because they're religious, but because they're part of a community.

That's why it's so striking that for decades, membership in all kinds of groups has declined as much as one-quarter. That's a lot of people who now need to find a sense of purpose and support somewhere else.

This is our challenge. We have to build a world where everyone has a sense of purpose and community. That's how we'll bring the world closer together.”

Artificial intelligence, big data and algorithms will rescue humanity from the loss of meaning. Or will it?

### **3. Jean Vanier – Becoming Human<sup>27</sup>**

Vanier explores in his writings the idea of belonging. He worries that our ecosystem is one where only the strong are valued. He says this:

“A society based on the Darwinian “survival of the fittest” where we all fend for ourselves, has serious disadvantages. It promotes a strong aggressive attitude and a need to win. It can paralyze the development of the heart, prevent healthy cooperation among people, and promote rivalry and enmity. It tends to marginalize those who are weak and even those who reject individualistic principles and to live in and for a society based on truth and justice for all. In a society that encourages an ethics of economy, of winning, of power, it is important to be admired. In such a society, an ethics of justice, solidarity, and cooperation, an ethics of the common good, can quickly fade into the background. Individual success is all that matters.”

Jean Vanier's own story is interesting. He joined the Royal Navy as a cadet officer aged 13, served for ten years, left and studied and taught philosophy the theology. Cutting a long story short he bought a house in France in 1964 and invited a couple of people with severe learning disabilities to live with him. That was the beginning of the L'Arche. There are now 147 communities in 35 countries around the world; 12 of which are in the UK supporting 258 adults.

Vanier is clear – it is he and all those who live in the communities as assistants that are the ones whose lives are touched and transformed. He tells the story of a man called Antonio who came to stay in the community in Trosly from hospital. He could not walk, speak or use his hands; he needed extra oxygen to breathe. He had an incredible smile and beautiful shining eyes. He accepted himself as he was; he lived a love of trust. In this way he touched

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<sup>27</sup> Vanier, J. (1999) *Becoming Human*, London, DLT.

many people's hearts. Vanier says: 'When one loves with trust, one does not give things, one gives oneself and, so calls forth a communion of hearts.' (p.91)

Vanier reports the transformation of those who cared for and lived with Antonio; they reported being 'led out of a society of competition where one has to be strong and aggressive into a world of tenderness and mutuality, where each person, strong and weak, can exercise their gifts.' We become in communion with another, we become open and vulnerable to them. Vanier admits that for him coming from spending his formative years in the Navy it was not easy to discover what he calls 'the way of the heart', the way of putting people first, of entering personal relationships, relating to people with gentleness and kindness. We might describe his journey as moving from having pity for those in need to having a heart of compassion. 'As the human heart opens up and becomes compassionate, we discover our fundamental unity, our common humanity.' (p.97) Let me finish by mentioning an image of religion I came across recently and find rather surprising; maypole dancing.

#### **4. Maypole dancers**

There are very few maypole dancers in Scotland to the best of my knowledge having been wiped out by Presbyterianism. It was a new cultural experience to find them in England where under Mary I, they were reinstated after a clear out during the reformation. I confess to having no idea what is happening. The image of the dancers is given by Jonathan Haidt in his book, 'The Righteous Mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion'.<sup>28</sup>

'Suppose you observe a young woman with flowers in her hair, dancing in a clockwise circle while holding one end of a ribbon. The other end is attached to the top of a tall pole. She circles the pole repeatedly, but not in a neat circle. Rather she bobs and weaves as few steps closer to or further from the pole as she circles. Viewed in isolation her behaviour appears pointless. But now add in five other women doing exactly what she is doing; and add six young men doing the same thing in a counter clockwise direction, and you've got a maypole dance. ... The dance symbolically enacts the central miracle of social life.'

He argues that Religion is a team sport; belonging is as important as belief and doing. Our beliefs and practices create community. It is in community more than belief that we find meaning. We can achieve more together than we can on our own. Maypoles are a metaphor in how God can bind people together. Yet it does not work if we do our own thing – we are called to be in community. Our identity is more than our individualism; it is part of the person rooted in God's Kingdom.

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<sup>28</sup> Haidt, J (2012) *The Righteous Mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion*. London, Penguin. p.303f.

It is in our Baptism that we join the church. Bishop Barbara Harris from the USA has said that 'your baptismal name is your highest calling'.

## 5. Summary

This evening we have considered aspects of identity to help us consider our vocations as humans in the light of the Easter story.

The Rabbits of Watership Down remind us that our sense of identity can come from our belonging to a group and that the roles and identities attached to them that we have can change if we are open minded.

Fukuyama took us on a journey of thought about identity; the creation of different understanding of the inner and outer self, the dignity arising from our internal moral freedom. How lived experiences and like-minded people create multiple identities leading to Facebook engineers seeking to use Artificial Intelligence to facilitate feelings of belonging.

Jean Vanier ideas challenges that AI can do what is the work of the heart; relating to people with gentleness and kindness of heart. Putting loving trust and kindness at the heart of our community

The idea of kindness I will explore tomorrow evening as we reflect on the Last Supper and Jesus demonstrating kindness as deed in washing the feet of his disciples.

### *Prayer*

*Lord God, you create us and know us in the womb, we give you thanks for what we have been, what we are and what we might be. You remind us of the love at the heart of relationships and that it is in belong together as a community that we can experience you as Father, Son and Holy. Send us out into your world with your grace encouraging us to live our lives in your name with love, hope and kindness in our relationships this and every day. We ask this through our redeemer, Jesus Christ. **Amen***

## **Maundy Thursday: Hessed; the act of love as deed**

*'Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.'*

This week I've been asking the question '**What is the meaning of human life today in the context of the Easter story?**' Part of the answer to that question is provided by the foundational story of our faith – the Easter story. It is through stories that we gain a sense of belonging, a sense of obligation and an idea of how to make sense of the world. God's

story is one that is not about clock time, rather it is the story that stretches from creation to the Kingdom of God – it is a story that is bigger than us and provides meaning in our lives by pointing to that which is beyond comprehension. It is a story about the ‘way of the heart’ rather than competition and strength.

I’ve been using various metaphors and images in my talks this week to help us think about how we might live our lives in the light of the Easter story. The metaphor I concluded with last evening was of a Maypole dance. This perhaps a very surprising image to bring into the context of the Christian faith. The key point of the image is that all the dancers are connected to the pole. Even though their movements appear random they are a very coherent team. There are two points to be drawn from that image –

- 1 - that we exercise our faith in community – it is a team effort;
- 2 - that we are all connected to God and whilst we may be expressing our faith in different ways that foundational connection exists are our guide in life.

We are connected to God by his love for us demonstrated in the story of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Today I wish to focus on the virtue of kindness; thinking of the kindness and compassion of God and in particular the story we are witnessing today; the foot washing and last supper. Jesus demonstrated love as deed.

### **A story:**<sup>29</sup>

‘In 1966 an 11-year-old black boy moved with his parents and family into a white neighbourhood in Washington. Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them, but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later writing about those first few days in their new home, he says, ‘I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here...’

As he was thinking these thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, ‘Welcome!’ Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and cream cheese and jelly sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment – the young man later wrote – changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. ...It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends. The young man, Stephen Carter, is now a law professor at Yale – he wrote a book about what he learnt that day called – ‘Civility’. The woman was Sara Kestenbaum, a religious Jew.

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<sup>29</sup> Sacks, J (2005) To Heal a Fractured World. London, Continuum. p.44ff.

In the Jewish tradition such civility is called ‘*hessed* – the doing of acts of kindness – which in turn is derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God.

Carter wrote this: “Only religion offers a sacred language of sacrifice-selflessness-awe that enables believers to treat their fellow citizens as fellow passengers. But even if religion is the engine of civility, it has too few serious practitioners, which is why those who are truly moved by it to love their fellow human beings are so special. I learned that truth in 1966 ...when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life for ever.”<sup>30</sup> Acts of kindness and generosity of spirit is part of what makes us human.

The Carnegie Trust exist to change minds and change lives. In 2017 they commissioned Julia Unwin to consider kindness, emotions and human relationships in relation to public policy in the UK. Her report published last year, is troubling reading. The headline is that kindness is a ‘blind spot in public policy’. She argues that “three huge drivers in public policy – the technological power to manage information, the digital power to manage communication, and the economic force of austerity – have made it ever more important that we look carefully at the role of emotions, and kindness in public policy.”

There are two languages in use; the **rational** narrative of metrics, value added, growth and resource allocation, of regulation and impact and the **relational** language of kindness and grief, of loneliness, love and friendship, of ties that bind, our sense of identity and belonging. Each of these lexicons have strengths and weaknesses. Often in public we have the rational debate and in private we speak in the language of relationship and kindness. Often in governance debates in the Church the rational language dominates. The last Diocesan Synod had a discussion about how to decide the method of collecting money from parishes to pay for the clergy and overhead costs. The rational language of metrics, growth and impact where very much in evidence. The relational language of a common purpose and belonging was there but struggled for a hearing.

Allowing kindness and emotion to enter into the public square is a challenge; yet that is what Jesus does in his act of kindness to his disciples. He identifies himself as being of service, showing kindness, love and compassion. He instituted the last supper by which we remember our belonging, love and friendship with him and those that we share the meal of communion with. Jesus demonstrated *hessed* – kindness as the act of love as deed.

Stephen Carter can still remember the taste of those cream cheese and jam sandwiches. That act of relational kindness changed his life. Jesus’ act of relational kindness to his disciples changes our lives. Our vocation as humans, our meaning in life, in the light of Maundy Thursday, is to be found in the way we point towards God through our relational acts of kindness.

Amen

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Sacks, J. (2005) *To Heal a Fractured World*, London, Continuum. p.45.

## Good Friday: Reflection – vulnerability and courage

“When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished’. Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” (Jn 19.30)

This week I’m reflecting on the question ‘**What is the meaning of human life today in the context of the Easter story?**’ God’s story of Jesus allows us to be part of something bigger than ourselves.<sup>31</sup> By finding meaning in that story and pointing others towards it we are offered an invitation by God to be human in a new way.

Good Friday is the pivot point of our faith. Without the death of Christ there would have been no resurrection. The cross has become the symbol of our faith. Yet the cross is a symbol of suffering and death. The Gospels are clear in their depiction of Jesus *on a journey* to Jerusalem, *on a journey* to his death at the hands of those in authority, *on a journey* to be our redeemer. Yet it is also *a journey* of courage and vulnerability. He became powerless in the eyes of the world – yet in his powerlessness he became the redeemer of us all.

Today I wish to reflect on how as humans we can find meaning in our own courage and vulnerability. I wish to start with some words from Senator Robert Kennedy in a speech to South African students in June 1966: (sorry not inclusive language)

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls or oppression and resistance.”<sup>32</sup>

Kennedy was pointing to the danger that we can feel powerless in the face of problems we see as too great to solve and hatreds too deep to cure. We can feel vulnerable and powerless. The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks carries with him in his diary the words of an earlier President – President Theodore Roosevelt: (sorry not inclusive language)

“It is not the critic that counts,  
Not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles,  
Or where the doer of deeds could actually have done them better.  
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,  
Whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood,  
Who strives valiantly,  
Who errs and comes up short again and again –  
Because there is no effort without error and shortcomings –  
But who does actually strive to do the deed,  
Who knows great enthusiasm, great devotion,  
Who spends himself in a worthy cause,  
Who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement

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<sup>31</sup> Harari Y N (2018) 21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Jonathan Cape, London. p.276

<sup>32</sup> MacArthur, B. (Ed) (1999) The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches. Penguin, London. p.370-1

And who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while darling greatly –  
So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls  
Who know neither victory or defeat.”<sup>33</sup>

Brene Brown<sup>34</sup> suggests that "Vulnerability is not winning or losing. It's having the courage to show up when you can't control the outcome." She defines "vulnerability as the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure"

God showed up in Christ. God became vulnerable and gave Christ the courage to face the trauma of death by crucifixion. Jesus struggles with his destiny in the garden of Gethsemane, and then is progressively isolated, misunderstood, betrayed by a friend, denied by his right-hand man, despised, rejected, finally forsaken even by the God whose *will* he strove to perform.

Frances Young is a retired professor of Theology from Birmingham. In 1967, she gave birth to her first child, whom she named Arthur. It turned out that Arthur had severe brain damage at birth. He had multiple disabilities. Frances tells the story of how Arthur taught her the meaning of the cross. The traditional theory of redemption that humanity stands in the dock condemned for its sin, but Christ steps in and takes the punishment on our behalf is questioned. There are classic objections to such a theory of redemption. (These include asking whether the idea of substituting an innocent party can satisfy the claims of justice, to recognising that God's freedom has been lost; God has been bound by the principle of justice. When in fact God could choose to be merciful.)

Prof Young's main objection is that such a theory does not work for someone like Arthur. She says:

“In what sense can he be said to be a sinner needing forgiveness, given such extreme limitations that he can hardly be held accountable for his actions or responses, let alone be expected to receive grace through faith? Maybe it makes a lot more sense to see the cross as a demonstration of God's love; ... repentance come from contemplation of the cross, and love is generated in us in response to God's love shown in Jesus Christ...”<sup>35</sup>

Yet Frances Young recognises that such a view does not give sufficient weight to the language of sacrifice, ransom, justification and redemption. It is in her words “too wishy-washy, not least because it ignores the importance of judgement.”

Frances Young is an expert in the early church and ancient Christian traditions. Although there are different ways of speaking about the cross, she suggests that they come down to a single concept: 'a cosmic battle between good and evil, God and Satan, in which the cross

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Sacks, J. (2005) *To Heal a Fractured World*. Continuum, London. p.270-1.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, B. (2018) *Dare to Lead*. London, Vermilion

<sup>35</sup> Young, F. (2014) *Arthur's Call*. London, SPCK. p.115

was the decisive moment of victory.<sup>36</sup> Yet such a worldview is hard to sustain in our age. But we must face the problem of what Young calls ‘gone wrongness’. She says:

“...the cross is indeed about God confronting and redeeming the whole complex of ‘gone wrongness’ that somehow afflicts creation ...the whole corporate mess we human beings have made of things.”

On Good Friday God makes a judgement about humanity; the sins of us collectively, the sins that put Christ to death and the anger of God that Jesus bore on our behalf. In Christ’s vulnerability he had the courage to take the pain of that judgement upon himself. **That is what redemption is – ‘bearing of the pain of judgement in love’.**

The gone wrongness of our world is connected to our fragility and vulnerability that we find hard to acknowledge in our culture. It takes courage to stand out in a crowd where the focus is on success and achievement. We live *in a world where* appraisal systems measure competence, *in a world where* care workers, teachers and bin collectors are badly paid and undervalued, *in a world where* bankers regard bonuses as a right.

Good Friday is a story of failure. Francis Young says that her son’s story is one of failure; in our society what value does he have? Yet such failure is stood on its head in the Kingdom of God. In considering our human vocation in the light of the Easter story we can point to the potential shift in values demonstrated by the cross and the life of Arthur and others like him. A shift in value away from individualism, dominance of the strong and competitive to one of community and mutual support, where the relational ecology thrives as we seek to be transformed by the love of God.

Like Christ, we too are powerless, vulnerable, not always in control yet given courage to enter the arena each day trusting in God’s redemption of us as humans. In our journey through life as we turn and face the reality of that redemption, we point others to the meaning of being human in the light of the cross.

### **Prayer**

*God of our journey,*

*You lead us through the green pastures of Palm Sunday’s hopeful celebration  
when all is joyful and well-being assured.*

*You also lead through the valley of the shadow of Good Friday  
when loss casts a fearful shadow of pain and despair.*

*You rode the colt of peace  
and hung on a cross of sacrifice  
to demonstrate the power of love.*

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p.116

*May we be transformed by that cross,  
that with courage and vulnerability  
we can follow you faithfully  
in days of hope and nights of loss,  
for you lead us as the God of peace  
Whose love has won all. Amen*

## **05.30 Dawn Eucharist and renewal of Baptismal Vows**

### **Easter morning – the power of celebration**

“Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the line cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.’ (Lk 24.12)

‘He went home – how could he have gone home?’

This morning we celebrate the wonders of Christ’s resurrection. Our New Testament witness to Jesus is written in the light of his resurrection; his failure on Good Friday is transformed on the third day. It is a cause of celebration – Alleluia, He is risen, Alleluia he is risen indeed.

Jonathan Sacks<sup>37</sup>, the former Chief Rabbi, tells the story of a head teacher in London coming to see him with her two deputies seeking his advice on their troubled school. They told of morale being at an all-time low with parents withdrawing their children. The roll had fallen from 1000 to 500 children. Examination results were bad; only 8% of students achieved high grades. If the head could not turn the school around quickly, it would have to close. Sacks writes:

“We talked for an hour or so on general themes: the school as community, how to create an ethos and so on. Suddenly, I realized that we were thinking along entirely the wrong lines. The problem she faced was practical not philosophical. I said: ‘I want you to live by one word – celebrate.’ She turned to me with a sigh: ‘You don’t understand – we have nothing to celebrate. Everything in the school is going wrong.’

‘In that case, I replied. ‘find something to celebrate. If a single student has done better this week than last week, celebrate. If someone has a birthday, celebrate. If it’s Tuesday, celebrate.’ She seemed unconvinced but promised to give the idea a try.”

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<sup>37</sup> Sacks, J (2005) To Heal a Fractured World. London, Continuum. p.255f.

Eight years later the Head teacher wrote to Jonathan Sacks to tell him what happened; higher grade exam results went from 8% to 65%, the school roll was back at 1000 and the headteacher had been just been made a Dame of the British Empire for her contribution to education. She ended her letter of thanks by telling him how much one word had changed the school and her life. Reflecting on the outcome Sacks makes the point that we grow to fill other people's expectations of us. If they are low, we remain small, if they are high, we walk tall. We each have gifts and talents that can lie dormant until someone awakens them.

Benjamin Zander, the world renown conductor teaches a class each year beginning in September. On day one he says to all the students "Your grade for the year is A – they have to write a letter dated May the next year – I got my A because.....; He seeks to invoke the possibility that is within them, to silence the inner critic. He says, "I only take A students". You can give an A to anyone. Your relationship is transformed when you give an A." When you get an A -celebrate."<sup>38</sup>

After conducting for twenty years Zander had an insight – 'The conductor does not make a sound – his job was to awaken 'possibility' in other people. If the eyes of the musicians in the orchestra are not shining, he was not doing his job.

Christ, through his resurrection, awakens within us the possibility of joy. Joy is possible as God gives us an A grade. Joy is possible when we awaken in others the possibility of connecting with God – when their eyes light up in celebration at the risen Christ.

On this Easter morn we gather to celebrate. Our meaning and human vocation arises from our engagement with the risen Christ. Yes, faith is philosophical but in essence our Christian faith is practical. As the story of the school indicates – the power of one word can transform our behaviour and outlook. Being given an A grade at the beginning of the year transforms the relationship between teacher and pupil. God raising Jesus this day transforms what it means to be human – so let us celebrate.

Remember – your Baptismal name is your highest calling.

Amen

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTKEBygQic0>