Modern Church South West Group Day Conference

Contemplative Practice As Mission (2).

Blessed are those who mourn – Missional listening

In this morning's paper I touched on the idea of 'telling' as something which is wordless, but at the same time a matter of exchange and encounter. I now want to develop this idea further in the context of the second of the Beatitudes 'Blessed, or 'happy' are those who mourn'.

Of all the paradoxical 'blessings' spoken by Jesus in these sayings, or sermon, this is perhaps the most anachronistic. How can a person who is deeply unhappy be thought of as 'blessed'?

A warped understanding of the word 'blessed' as it relates simultaneously to happiness and virtue, has been used over the centuries to shame or control whole sections of the Church, and is still implicit in some of its attitudes to marginalised groups today. Suffering and sacrifice have shaped the way women are thought of in the Church and, to some extent, out of it as well. Not so very long ago, women were told that we had to suffer to be beautiful, an idea that possibly has its origins in Mediaeval teaching on holy anorexia and retains its hold today in the virtue ethics of weight and body image. Anorexia, with its guilt and self-loathing, also functions a little like cancer. Its destructive elements, often a combination of grief and anger, feed on the condition like malignant cells, leading into an endless cycle of self-hatred culminating in profound alienation.

The alienated person is one who is both angry and grieving, a situation which makes it impossible for that person to trust themselves or other people. Since anger and grief are often hard to understand, or even notice (in ourselves or in other people), the alienated person becomes someone who is avoided. As a result, the anger-grief syndrome becomes a self-perpetuating state of affairs. We think it best not to engage with them, telling ourselves that

they probably prefer it that way, or we avoid them because they are strange and different, and they avoid us because they feel this way about themselves. Being different, not belonging, whatever the reason, gives rise to a permanent state of mourning, of grief and alienation.

The Church has many alienated people on the edge of its life, people who do not readily fit in to a system which tries to be 'relevant' but at the same time clings to long-outdated ways of thinking about what it means to be human in today's world. So what we are talking about here, in the context of the Church, is the kind of grieving people experience through the dishonouring of the human person. Recent history of abuse in the Church shows that those who it can't accommodate are either marginalized or simply airbrushed out of the picture. As a result of this, cases of clerical abuse of people in its care, most of them historic, are only now beginning to surface after decades of silence. People remained silent because 'things were different in those days'. The Peter Ball case, one of the most recent (at the time of writing) to be fully and publicly documented is doubly shaming. First, because of what Ball did while he was a bishop, and over the next twenty years, despite the initial revelation of that abuse, and secondly, because of the way the institution protected him in order to protect itself. The institutional Church owes much to the silence and cover-up made possible by the association of suffering as somehow part of a sanctification process, certainly in the life of the Catholic Church. I think of my own experience of a Catholic boarding school and the emotional abuse endured by homesick little girls at the hands of nuns who simply delighted in terrifying us. We mourned in our isolation and in our fear, but we did not feel our mourning as a blessing.

So it is to the Church's shame that, over the centuries, people, and women in particular, have been persuaded that their own unhappiness is somehow meant to be, either as a gift from God or as some kind of putative sacrifice. Peter Ball abused young boys for decades with the help of this kind of emotional blackmail. It is arguable, then, that Neil Todd, one of Ball's victims, committed suicide as a direct consequence of a repression of the mourning, or grieving, that he needed to do at the time. In subsequent years he would have mourned his irretrievably lost youth and felt angry with himself for maintaining the silence imposed on him. In other words, his suicide was the ultimate expression of repressed anger. Furthermore, the culture of silence which he now inhabited had perhaps so invaded his inner life as to render it unsustainable. This would have directly impacted his sense of self. Where a person's inner life is suffocated by the abusive behaviour of an organisation or of an individual, the one who depends on that life, as well as on the organisation, can no longer

function as a person. Their mourning may then become the most extreme form of depression and anger and, not surprisingly, may lead to suicide. Allowing for the fact that we don't yet know the reasons for it, the recent suicide of the Revd. Anna Matthews raises some concerning questions in this regard.

But I think it is also helpful to see Neil Todd and his tragic suicide as a kind of Lazarus story. Were Jesus to be alive today he would be both grieving and angry in regard to Neil Todd and to all sufferers of historic abuse, for whom it is too late for reparation to be made, their abusers being for the most part long since dead.

Righteous Anger

At the same time, it is in the knowledge of God's righteous anger displayed in the incident with Lazarus, that sufferers of historic abuse are to know themselves as vindicated and it is in that vindication that they are to reclaim their personhood. Their mourning is blessed through the righteous anger of God. *(For anyone reading this – rather than hearing it spoken – I do return to Lazarus a bit later, so stay with me if you can!)*

Similar stories of abuse to that of Neil Todd have emerged in the context of the Amish communities in the US. Here, it concerns the exoneration, and even blessing, of men who repeatedly rape young women, some of them close blood relations. In some cases the women in question are sent away to be 'rehabilitated' with the use of powerful anti-phychotics, their mourning denied (they are described as having 'mental issues', or as plain liars) and their righteous anger forcibly suppressed. In not being believed, or in having her experiences suppressed, the woman becomes in her own eyes 'dirty' and thereby shamed. This in itself is another form of rape, the rape of that woman's personhood.

All of this suggests that when Jesus promises those who mourn that they shall be comforted, he is first of all giving them permission to own their own pain and to face into their real feelings, including feelings of justifiable anger, in regard to those who have been responsible for their suffering, whether directly or as complicit third parties.

The question I now want to explore has to do with what they are then being empowered to become, and to do, as a result of this direct experience of restorative life, or what we might also call salvation. Where the victim has encountered healing, probably through the ministry of competent psychologists, but also through the love and loyalty of

people around them and, as in the case of the Amish victims, of support groups they themselves have created, the possibility for a transformed understanding of God now exists.

These support groups are important, not only for those who they serve, but as a witness to the healing and restorative love of God which is still capable of being worked out as salvation in the ashes of violence. In the context of recovery from institutionalised abuse, especially where it pertains to the Church, these support groups are, in a missional sense, the true Church. They embody the salvific work of God, walking alongside the victims of abuse and 'speaking' the gospel in their embodiment of God's healing and of his anger. They also enable the process of forgiveness to begin to take shape.

But here I risk running too quickly, and too far ahead. It might even be presumptuous to hold that someone who has known violence at the hands of another church member, especially one who holds a position of authority, should forgive. The culture of cover-up among some of the Amish has, in the recent past, taught that forgiveness is expected of them as their Christian duty and that to betray their abuser by not forgiving is in some way to betray Christ and thereby to fail as a Christian. And it is an even bigger ask to expect them to rejoice in it and feel blessed. So how is it that their suffering can be thought of as in some way 'missional'?

There exists in the minds of many Christians who have suffered abuse something that connects their inability to 'move on', with being unable to act as convincing bearers of the Good News, that translates as a failure to forgive and hence as personal failure in regard to being a Christian and a bearer of the gospel. In other words, if you have not 'got over it' you are not communicating the Good News. Added to this, the pressure to evangelise is felt to be somehow non-negotiable. Part of the reason for this pressure lies in the well known insecurities of the institutional Church – dwindling numbers and a corresponding diminishment of revenue and human assets. But when Jesus spoke his words of blessing on the grassy mountainside nothing was said about the need to gather together large numbers of people, even if he himself was doing just that. The emphasis is first on 'blessing' from which it is probably safe to deduce that only in knowing ourselves to be blessed in a particular, and unique way, can we go out and pronounce that same blessing on others.

We do this first through listening or, better put, paying attention. In other words, having paid attention to our own pain and anger, rather than covering it up, we are well

placed to pay attention to the pain and anger that others are experiencing. In doing this, we embody the good news of the Gospel.

Blessing as attention

The philosopher Simone Weil once wrote that there is no greater service that one person can render to another than giving them five minutes of undivided attention. Blessing is about unconditional listening whose only purpose is to discern the real pain that may be hidden in the depths of any one human heart. We do not need to be qualified psychoanalysts to do this, but we do need to learn to hear at depth. Hearing at depth requires self knowledge, or at least enough self awareness to be able to note, in a non-judgmental way, those moments when our own woundedness so identifies with that of another that we look to somehow assuage it through theirs. The more technical term for this is 'transference', often leading to no more than the giving of sympathy, roughly translated as "I know how you feel.-The same thing happened to me". Sympathy seldom involves paying real attention. It is not hearing at depth.

Sympathy, in a grief situation, does nothing for the person who is grieving. In fact, it only serves to burden them still more because it obliges them to make space in their suffering for some of ours. What we need to be able to offer, then, is authentic response, a response which comes from a willingness to set aside our own grief (though we will have learned from it) and to enter into the particularities of the grief we are being called to pay attention to at any given moment.

Eva Hoffman, a second-generation Holocaust survivor, writes that:

'perhaps the best that we can ask for, as we contemplate the Shoah from a lengthening distance, is that we distinguish authentic from inauthentic response, genuine perception from varieties of bad faith. Perhaps sometimes it is better to admit that until we can speak genuinely, we should remain silent.'[1]

It is in being genuine in our perception of, and response to, another person's grief that we come close to becoming bearers of the Christ to that person.

At the same time, another's suffering, or their memories of it as they 'mourn' in telling their story can be a blessing to the reader or hearer. I think of the account of another

[1] Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: A Meditation on the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, Secker & Warburg, London, 2004, p.179-180

holocaust survivor, Zenon Jakob Stolowski, a polish Catholic seminarian who spent four years in Auschwitz enduring torture and starvation, listening daily to the screams of his dying fellow inmates as he dug the graves they would be piled into when the gas chamber had finished with them, events which took place over 70 years ago, made real in a special report picked up on my phone between breakfast and starting work on the 28th of January 2020.[2] In reading such an account of suffering, time is compressed. The remembering and the mourning, the horror, become ours, the readers', in the immediacy of the present moment. How are we to be blessed in this, unless we can take such memories on into our deeper consciousness, our inner self?

In doing this work of remembering alongside those who have suffered, we are not alone, and this makes the doing of it a blessing. We connect with all who feel for the pain of another person, or of another people, or of the earth itself. We connect across the generations by mourning together, and in this we are blessed. In being willingly connected to the grief of others, including grief that originates from before we were even born, we function across the generations in a cellular, organic, way. Together, we become part of the underlying continuum of history, shaped as it is by grief, but also as the pattern of life itself. So mourning the pain of the past becomes part of the re-creative mourning of the present, the kind of mourning which powers change and transformation.[3]

It is also our experience of pain and grief, no matter how different our situation to that of the one we are attending to, that enables healing to begin to take effect. Most of the time, as Eva Hoffman suggests, this kind of attentive 'being present to someone' involves nothing more than being a silent witness, even a witness who is physically absent but present to their pain from a distance. In being consciously present to another person's pain, or to that of a nation or people, we confer the kind of blessing which comes from within a deep and vibrant spiritual life. Without that deeper life, without the anger that is Christ's outside the tomb of Lazarus, or that is God's in the face of injustice and of the exploitation of the powerless, we numb the pain of another person, as well as our own, leaving a situation that is ripe for further abuse. The pain has been 'cut off', put somewhere ostensibly out of reach, a place where its voice cannot be heard. Hearing the voice of pain, in another person, or nation, or section of

[2] CNN Special report by Bianca Nobile, 28th January, 2020
[3] Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, 'Spiritual Principles in Action' in *Generation Y, Spirituality and Social Change*, Justine Afra Huxley (ed.), Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2019.

society opens up the painful process necessary to healing, and healing, in the context of those who mourn, is central to the work of mission.

So the work of mission, as it is informed by mourning, begins with healing, and healing, you might say, begins with neighbourliness, with being able to empathise deeply with another person's grief, by meeting them in the loneliness of the grief itself.

I think of Jessica Martyn's unsparing account of a day in the life of her relationship with her daughter who is a heroin addict. In her story, 'Attention',[4] the lament takes the form of self observation, in regard to another's suffering, the suffering of her daughter, and the constant challenge of having to deal with her own anger – anger at being obliged to play a role, in order to maintain the delicate thread of her daughter's life which, should it snap, she would blame herself for. Perhaps I find this account powerful because it resonates so well with the years we had trying to come to terms with our own daughter's mental health issues and anorexia, trying to meet her in it. The 'why' and the 'how' forever returning to haunt us, the sense of trying to relate truthfully to a person you don't recognise and the way you try and match this unrecognisable person to the bubbly intelligent child she once was. Added to this, as is also no doubt true for Jessica Martyn, is the incomprehension and guilt about what this loved child has done to herself – what she looks like now, and what she might have looked like, had the anorexia, or as in Jessica Martyn's case, the heroin addiction, never happened. What would their lives have been? And then back to the question of whose fault it is that their lives have turned out as they have. Is it a defective gene? Or, again, did we miss something in early childhood? The mourning involves a great deal of remorseful soul-searching. So we swing from lament to anger and back again, and seem without the language needed to give shape to our lamenting and turn it into something potentially fruitful, something like blessing.

Mission as Work

All of this raises some profoundly spiritual questions in regard to mission.

When it comes to doing mission we need to remind ourselves of the etymological significance of the word, what it means and what are the demands it makes of us. What, after all, *is* the Good News that we are being 'sent out' to preach? If mission is about bringing good news, then it must be about setting people free from whatever the fears are that bind

[4] *Praying for England: Priestly Presence in Contemporary Culture,* Sarah Coakley and Samuel Wells (eds.), Continuum, London, 2008

them, that diminish their spirit, and that diminish them as persons. Mission always entails freedom for the flourishing of the human spirit, freedom to be more fully the persons we are created to be. This suggests that our believing (itself a word which falls far short of the meaning of faith itself) ought to inform who we are. Belief becomes faith when it embodies life, when it offers freedom. Those on the receiving end of mission will know at once whether the person they are listening to is offering them freedom – or its opposite.

So when we think about blessing in the context of mourning and loss, we are challenging the notion of faith itself, not so much whether we have it, or whether another person might have it, or even want it, but whether our own faith is fit for purpose, the setting free of the human spirit and the honouring of another person in the way God honours them.

Given these two imperatives, is the faith we have supple and strong enough to meet the great weight of loss and suffering that another person may be carrying? If it is not, we will find ourselves resorting to a panacea of platitudes and truisms, a covert avoidance of grief, as we contain, or keep at arm's length, the anger and shame that they may also be feeling. If we are to be instrumental in freeing another person of the anger which so exacerbates the grief they are enduring, especially in regard to the loss of another person through death or abandonment, we need to fully enter into their anger. Martha was angry with Jesus for not being there when he was most needed. Jesus was possibly angry with himself as well but, more importantly, he was angry with the fact of death. His call to Lazarus to 'come forth' was a cry of rage.

Anger is what gives grief shape and substance, but it can also destroy a person from within, especially if that person is made to feel alone or judged. Neil Todd took his own life in angry despair. He was utterly failed, not only by the feral instinct which prompted the institutional Church to watch its own back rather than take care of its victims, but by a total absence of any missional anger, in regard to the abuse he suffered at the hands of Peter Ball.

Missional anger is, in this sense as well, rooted in the life of the spirit. To engage truthfully with another person's anger, in the pain they are enduring, we must enter into it in our own spiritual wrestling. Part of that involves taking responsibility for, or bearing the burden of, what has caused their suffering, so in that sense mission begins with a kind of repentance, a deep sense of regret or loss.

The same is true of the suffering we see all around us. As with the pain of the individual, so with the suffering of whole peoples. Henri Nouwen writes that 'the conflicts in

our personal lives as well as the conflicts on regional, national, or world scales are *our* conflicts, and only by claiming responsibility for them can we move beyond them.'[5] The missional task begins with entering into their pain and owning it as our own.

All of this begs the question of how our spiritual life, the life that is so vital to the true work of mission, is to be shaped. Where does the raw material needed for it to begin to happen come from? I think the seeds of transformative spirituality often lie dormant in the places, and in the people, where we least expect to find them.

At the time of the Greenham Common protests, back in the 1980's, one of the women was heard to remark that she felt a need for some 'spirituality' in the work they were doing. Well, times have changed in that respect. Today's activist generation are motivated by spirituality. Their spirituality finds its meaning and purpose in activism. The so called baby boomer generation and generation Y, have a very acute sense of the confluence of the spiritual life with the practical, especially when it comes to the relief of suffering and to the future of the planet. This is arguably less true of Generations X (millennials) and Z.

But I also think that to identify and, by implication, separate, any one generation from another compromises the extent to which we are all able to bless one another across time, as well as in the present. The urgency of the Extinction Rebellion movement comes from a sense of the tension that has been building for the last forty years at least, across the generations. As with all protest, it is a form of lament, a collective mourning in the face of sin. And as with former protests, and even martyrdoms, this one is a cry of outrage about the human proclivity for selfishness, the basic instinct of survival of the fittest, or what Richard Dawkins describes as the 'selfish gene'.

So two things are going on here: First, we are seeing a great movement of inter-generational blessing. Climate is a matter of concern for all of us, including those of us who may no longer be on the planet after it reaches and overtakes the tipping point. The blessing comes with a shared and conscious taking of responsibility for our current predicament. The fact that it is shared makes it a blessing of hope. This gives impetus and purpose to what we think and do together leaving no time to waste on blame and recrimination for the mistakes of the past, mistakes that were made in ignorance as well as out of selfishness and greed. There is still time for purposeful mourning.

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[5] Henri J.M. Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1996 p.32

Secondly, the millennial generation, for all their perceived materialism, is now beginning to make very clear connections between the inner life of the individual and the collective well-being of society. Some of them are inspired by faith traditions other than Christianity but all speak with passion about the need to forge a new meaning from existing spiritual disciplines.[6] This is something which those of us who were around in the sixties, and can recall the attraction to Krishna consciousness which underpinned some of our own protests, will remember feeling as well. I remember also noticing that our dreams for peace did not seem to fit with the kind of Christian evangelicalism which was on the ascendant at the time. For many of us, a noticeable hiatus existed between high profile Christian religion, and its practitioners, and the mood of the day which was much more about peace as the outcome of mutual understanding and respect.

I believe the Church as a whole has come a long way since then. There is also a discernible similarity in the hopes and beliefs of one generation with those of its predecessors. While Generation X, for example, (those born in the seventies and eighties) were reacting to a Thatcherite and highly individualistic work ethic, Generation Y's belief in the importance of the spiritual life, and of how the lack of it impacts on the environment, resonates very strongly with the thinking and life styles embraced by those of the immediate post-war generation, those who came to early adulthood in the early sixties. So we are trying to connect with one another from beyond and before our individual lifespans. We connect in a kind of collective and prophetic lament and we connect in hope.

My own generation's early adulthood was defined on the one hand, if you lived in the US, by the war in Vietnam, and on the other, if you lived in England, by an anarchical break with the dullness of post-war austerity. Both of these scenarios arguably gave expression to something that was as yet to be fully revealed in the urgent climate protests of today. Both generations were searching for meaning, almost, you could argue, for a re-drawing of moral boundaries. These were spiritual protests, pointing to the fact that we belong together and that the future will depend on the extent that we can work together in a spirit of reconciliation and harmony.

Harmony is about different voices, the voice of each age, perhaps, singing a different note in such a way as to enrich the sound of the whole, the sound of a single lament which

[6] The Sufi teacher and activist, Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee writes that 'the role of the spiritual life and spiritual values in understanding and responding to the environmental and social crises we now face are the questions at the core of this younger generation.' *Generation Y,* ch.6, p.77

raises its voice at various points in history. The lamenting is what unites us. We need to lament not just as Church, but as members of the human race. This suggests that if our Christian mission is to be at all credible, the Church with its structures and authoritarian hierarchies needs to cede, or dissolve into, what we too often dismiss as secular humanism. To be secular is to be of the times, of the age. To be human in the times we live in is to mourn. So mission begins with our serving of one another across the divide that still exists between the secular and the religious.

One of my former students describes this belonging together as 'always pushing towards a common understanding, like digging a tunnel from opposite sides of the river'. It is vital for the peace and stability of the world and society that we encounter one another half-way along the secular-religious tunnel, so that we can see the light which shines at both ends. Nowhere is this encounter more needed than in the field of commerce and global economics.

According to figures released by the billionaire census of 2023, there are 2,640 billionaires in the world at present. There are 24,480,000 millionaires in the US alone. More than half the world's wealth is held by these two sets of individuals.[7] What gives us cause to lament is not just the amounts of money involved, and the shocking discrepancy in wealth distribution that they reveal, but the callous disregard for the law, especially in regard to insurance and the use of false or 'shell' companies. These 'shell' companies allow wealth to be siphoned away from insurance claimants, as well as from inland revenue authorities, leaving no sign that it had ever existed. Some of you may have seen the film 'The Laundromat', a brilliantly executed exposé of the Panama Papers scandal starring Meryl Streep. Films like 'The Laundromat', give voice to this lament and invite a missional response. It is worth noting, in the context of that film, that its pivotal moments turn on prayer. The first, when an outspoken priest is murdered in his own church and the second when Streep herself turns to prayer as a last resort. "Isn't it about time the meek inherited the earth?" she cries and, even more transparently honest "Jesus said 'forgive them for they know not what they do' but they darn well do know what they're doing." Days later, in the film, her answer comes. Barak Obama's speech condemning corruption and money laundering is aired and the Panama Papers global fraud scam finally begins to unravel.

All of this suggests that the future of the entire planet, depends on the individual taking responsibility for the past, first, by making the space for the pain that has been caused

[7] As of 11th February, 2020

and whose effects we are now beginning to feel as climate change with its own economic attendant effects, and then through mindful attention to the way we encounter one another in it and think of the earth as a shared place. There is an existential element to this new state of being together. We live and build from within what is broken. We must mourn together before we can, in a sense, dance together. Here begins the comfort promised to us in our mourning. It comes with not having papered over the cracks as we soldier on and try to make the best of things, with not trying to build a future while the coals of acrimony and bitterness are still smouldering in our own national politics. Instead, there must be genuine mourning, the tears of compunction perhaps.

But collective mourning needs to be focused. It needs to find a *point de repère*, something or better, someone, who can distil it in such a way as to hold its essential truth before our eyes, so that we can focus our lament, or give voice to that truth together, so that we can protest in the fullest sense of the word. We need prophetic leaders, both in the Church and in the world, who know how to mourn with their people while at the same time offering them hope. Who then, will go for us?

LC
January, 2019 (updated June, 2023)

Things to ponder and discuss

Does mourning only involve sadness? How should we, as people of faith, read bad or depressing news?

Is money still the root of all evil?

How should liberal thinking Christians think of mission?

Sympathy vs. Empathy – How important is the difference?

How would you respond to someone who says that 'if you have not got over it, you are not communicating the good news of forgiveness in Christ?'

Are there alienated people in your congregation? How does their alienation manifest itself? What do you think they need?