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Viewpoint



Three Sermons

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Introduction

This *Viewpoint* contains three sermons. Rev Jim Corrigan has recently taken up a ministry at Padiham with Ratwenstall in Lancashire. Kath Forder is the Lay Pastor at Kidderminster and Rev Andy Pakula is the minister at Newington Green and Islington in London.

Rev Jim Corrigan - Sermon

The figure of John the Baptist who we meet in the Gospels, is an enigmatic one. We get many glimpses of this John in the New Testament, but not a full picture. In fact, we feel there's a lot more to know about him, and there's a lot more we'd like to know, particularly about his relationship with Jesus, more that we are *not being told*.

In the first Reading today, from Matthew's gospel (3: 1-12), the chapter opens with John appearing in the wilderness of Judea, in the south of Israel, and proclaiming that people must repent because the 'Kingdom of Heaven' is near. Then Matthew tells us this John is the one of whom the Old Testament prophet Isaiah spoke when he said:

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'

So John the Baptist is clearly placed within the Jewish tradition as the forerunner of the Messiah – whose coming is now imminent. John is the voice in the wilderness crying out: *'Prepare yourselves!'*

But what else was he doing in the wilderness? Well, it was obviously a tough, hard life – we are told he wore clothes of camel hair and his food was locusts and honey. But this prophet attracted people from Jerusalem and all Judea to be baptised

in the River Jordan, to be taken into the Jewish faith once they had repented – and so they *put their lives in order before the coming of the Messiah, the coming of Judgement*.

Why baptism though? Baptism was used by Jews to admit Gentiles to their Judaic faith – but it appears that John was also using baptism for renewal of the faith for *all people, as the coming of the Messiah approached*.

John was not the only wandering prophet in the desert or wilderness at this time. But he seems to have been a particularly formidable one. The Roman historian Josephus makes clear that John was executed on the orders of the Roman ruler Herod Antipas because of Herod's fear of political revolts – and John was stirring people far too much.

John the Baptist was operating to the east of Jerusalem, along the River Jordan, close to the Dead Sea, a particularly hot and hostile environment, below sea level. And it is most likely he would have had contact with the Jewish community at Qumran, thought to be Essenes – this is the community recorded in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and they had a monastery in the area.

Extensive archeological evidence of their settlement remains, but of course the Dead Sea scrolls – which were only discovered last century – provide a picture of the beliefs and customs of this community. They too believed God's reign was soon to be re-established on earth, and so their members underwent repeated baptisms – they had to be ever-ready for God's rule, always in a state of purity. There is evidence of an incredibly complicated system of aqueducts at Qumran, used for these ritual baptisms.

Of course, these were not the normal baptism rites practised by Jews – baptism would have normally been a single event

– a rite marking entry into the faith (or perhaps a second baptism, a renewal, as practised by John).

Immediately after the passage from Matthew that we heard this morning, John baptises Jesus, and then Jesus himself goes for 40 days and nights of fasting into the wilderness. After this, we are told, he goes north to Galilee to begin his own ministry.

But there are indications in the Gospels of a much closer relationship between John and Jesus – that Jesus would come down from Galilee to see John, either to work with him or consult him. And it is clear that some of Jesus’ disciples had once been followers of John.

So the relationship was a close one – and both Jesus and John are fulsome in their praise of one another. John the Baptist certainly appears to see Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah ‘who will gather the wheat’ and ‘burn the chaff’ in eternal fire. As these words indicate, John had a traditional and harsh view of the Messiah’s role – he did not foresee that Jesus would teach a doctrine of loving your enemies.

But let’s move the focus now to the wilderness. What does it signify? – and why would you go there? Well, it’s a harsh, testing environment – you test yourself firstly, and so for any others you meet. Being removed from normal society makes for stark choices. The tests are both physical – can you survive in such a place? – and psychological – can you live with yourself and your demons in such a place?

And we know that the wilderness is *not only outside of us, do we not? We know too that there is a wilderness within – a wilderness often hidden from others, often hidden from ourselves.*

And we know this inner wilderness can come upon us at any time – suddenly, without warning. And that this inner desolation can be even more frightening than the desolation without. Gerard

Manley Hopkins wrote: *O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap / May / who ne'er hung there.'*

And it is this inner wilderness that the 20th Century Welsh poet R.S. Thomas is writing about in his poem 'Alaska', our second reading today. The poet is in Alaska it seems:

'Out here there is no history; / the cliff's withered face / is too weathered to be human. / The sky is a blank lens.'

And no doubt the poem can be seen as a description of this ice-and-snow bound state in the far north-west of the United States, but it is the *inner Alaska that really interests Thomas, we feel – that vast, pitiless landscape we can suddenly find ourselves in: an ice-bound land with no defining features, blank sky, a land without any people to be seen, with only the remote cracking of a bough to be heard, amid the conifers standing perpetually to attention. Otherwise, there is only emptiness and silence.*

It's a place that seems cursed for eternity, and as he sinks to his knees, Thomas writes 'in this temple that God has abandoned'. Here, no-one is listening – and, if there is a question, there is no answer.

Could this poem though, be about the real place, Alaska? Well, it could, but clearly there is a bleakness within which is finding an echo in the bleakness without. Some visitors to Alaska find it beautiful – I've never been there, have any of you? Did you find it attractive? Yes ... well snow and mountains and trees can certainly be very beautiful, can they not? So I think this poem is primarily an inner vision, or an inner vision colouring an outer one.

What then is Thomas describing? Is it depression? Well it could be a bleak, depressed inner state that he describes here. But inner desolation can take several forms – so this could be a description of spiritual dryness – or of despair, of inner pain – a

pain numbed by cold and ice.

It's worth noting that R.S. Thomas was an Anglican priest and he is a very fine religious poet. Thomas often seemed to live in a place of spiritual bleakness – a place that God had abandoned. The poet was a religious man but one visited continuously by doubt and questioning. He certainly does not take God for granted – in fact he writes of God as that great 'absence', that 'void'.

This – in spiritual terms – is the *via negativa* – the way to God through God's absence – the Divine known only in our hungering, our longing, which is never to be satisfied, never to be fulfilled – save perhaps for a few unbidden moments of insight or revelation or joy. So R.S. Thomas knew this inner wilderness very well, too well, one suspects – he lived within it. And I think we all know this inner wilderness too – even if we hold it at bay or try to suppress it. And when we encounter difficulties and trials, our inner wilderness can overwhelm us.

So can we get over these times of depression, these spiritual droughts, this desolation? There may not be superficial cures. But the words of Paramahansa Yogananda, that Hindu wisdom teacher, may help us, those words for our time of reflection earlier: *'Your trials did not come to punish you, but to awaken you.'*

With this perspective, we can see the difficulties of life, including times of inner desolation, not as purely negative periods – but as times that can deepen our understanding – of ourselves in the first instance. As Wayne Teasdale wrote in his commentary on Yogananda's words: the hardships we encounter 'can serve as vehicles for realisation', they can awaken us to the serious purpose of life and inspire us not to waste ourselves in a half-hearted existence.

So these difficulties we stumble upon in life, or rather that stumble on to us, can reveal our own capacities for endurance – and by testing our commitment, they can deepen our commitment.

And this can be true for all aspects of life, including the spiritual life and the life of faith.

Let us hope that when we are tested, we find the reserves, the hidden depths, to endure and ultimately to triumph over the hardships. And that, in this season of Advent, through this testing, we can come to deeper realisations, and ultimately to a deeper sense of purpose, to a deeper joy.

Let us ask this for all of us on our journeys, our many different journeys.

Amen.

Address - Kath Forder

I wonder how many of you have trouble with the word 'God'... ? You will realise from that last reading that I do... For me, it brings to mind a paternalistic idea of God. A God who pats me on the head and says 'There, there, don't worry. Do as you are told, keep quiet and don't interfere in adult affairs. Father knows best; I make the decisions round here, it's not your problem.'

Obviously my perspective is coloured by my own experience of childhood – my father was of the opinion that children (especially girls) should be 'seen and not heard', and maybe he was responding to the idea of God the Father with a perception that all fathers are standing in God's stead. My view of God the Father reflects that background.

If we are lucky enough to have a 'good' father – and a child's perspective on that might be very different from an adult's – we might think of God as an even better father, and that concept might suffice us throughout our lives. But if our own father isn't so good – or is downright bad – what happens when we are con-

fronted by this idea of God as a father; when we are asked to say 'Our Father, who art in heaven' ... ? We might then view God as the ideal father we haven't got, or decide that as (in our experience) good fathers don't exist, then God doesn't exist, either. Or we might envisage God as a 'bigger' version of our own father – more powerful, stronger, angrier.

But children grow up. As we mature, we have less need of paternalistic care, and the model of God the Father begins to lose its relevance. Do we then discard the concept of God altogether? Many do.

In 2001, Anglican Reverend Marcus Braybrooke wrote:

When asked how they imagined God, most people who responded to recent survey came close to a traditional child's view, of "an old man with a long white beard up in the sky." It is not surprising that many of them also said that they did not believe in God. ...

Quoted in *God is no thing*, Richard Boeke

Many people brought up in the Protestant tradition understand God as a slave-driver, one who demands that we are always working, never allowing us to rest without guilt – the basis of the Protestant work ethic. Some people understand God as a policeman pursuing them, judging them and punishing them for the wrong they have done – 'wrong' being defined in many ways, not all of them having anything to do with religious belief! Or perhaps we think we believe that God is love, yet deep in our hearts we fear his punishment. There's a story of one lady, who at 60 still clearly remembered being 7 years old, with a Sunday School teacher standing over her, red-faced and angry, shouting 'You will believe that God loves you!' I think that teacher rather missed the point ...

There seems to be a conflict between the personal, subjective

God, the one we call 'Father' or 'Mother', who responds much as we would, and feels anger and pain, love and compassion, and the impersonal ineffable God, the 'ground of being' that is beyond our understanding, beyond human experience, creator yet part of the universe, the deepest part of our self of whom we only ever get partial glimpses ... 'for we see through a glass, darkly'.

In the Bible, these different ideas of God are portrayed right from the beginning of Genesis, and throughout much of the Old Testament. They even have different names. The God of Genesis Chapter 1 is referred to as 'Elohim' in the Hebrew, meaning 'the Supreme Being' – this God merely speaks, 'and it is so'. The universe is spoken into existence: for instance, Gen 1:3; 'Then God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light.' This God is all powerful, with abilities far beyond human understanding; a God whose mere voice is sufficient to separate earth from water, light from dark, and to bring life to a planet.

In contrast, the God of Genesis Chapter 2 acts; he literally gets his hands dirty, creating man and animals out of the ground. And he now has a personal name, Yahweh, which means 'He that was, and that is, and that is to come', and in the Bible is generally translated as LORD God. In chapter 2, verse 7, we read 'then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.'

Is the second view of God – creator as artisan – easier for us to understand? It's certainly a God who seems not too far removed from us; perhaps a more comfortable view of God than that in Genesis 1. A being who needs to physically move bits of earth around to form his creatures appears more nearly human, less terrifying, than a force which creates merely by a spoken command. Though there is that little matter of 'breathing life' into the dust. This God is just as powerful... And it is made clear throughout the Hebrew Bible that Yahweh, who becomes God of Israel, is also the God of Creation. And whether or not we worship

‘God’, whether or not we believe that he (or she or it) exists, we all hold some sort of image, an impression of what the term stands for. I wonder how you envisage God... if you had to describe your concept of ‘God’ in a few words, what would you say? Father, Mother, judge, policeman, love, vengeance, terrible, awe-some, punisher, carer, creator, destroyer, saviour, remote or close, a God of wrath or mercy, compassionate or bossy, cruel or kind, killjoy, forgiving; a God who needs flattery to keep him on our side, or the keeper of a celestial balance-sheet ... God has been thought of in all these ways and more.

Yet these are all ways of anthropomorphising God, giving him (or her or it) human characteristics, human feelings and attributes. It makes it easier for us to relate to him – but isn’t there an element of hubris, of arrogance there? Doesn’t it amount to creating God in our own image? And if so, doesn’t that confine God, restrict him – or her, or it - to human possibilities? Where is the divine power in a God who is like us? As Sara Maitland said, *‘why bother about a tiny little, simple God who is slightly less complicated than the workings of my own mind?’*

If we believe that God has human feelings, human ways of responding to the world and the doings of those he created, then – just as we learn to understand those we are close to and become able to predict their reactions (to a greater or lesser degree) – then we might begin to believe that we know what God is thinking, that we are certain of what he wants us to do.

And that is dangerous, as Sam Harris says:-

‘As long as it is acceptable for a person to believe that he knows how God wants everyone on earth to live, we will continue to murder one another on account of our myths. ... Certainty about the next life is incompatible with tolerance in this one.’

‘The end of faith’, Sam Harris

Servetus had a different approach; he was one of those 16th

century thinkers who we look back to as an early 'Unitarian', and he found God everywhere, experiencing the Holy as a universal soul, animating all things. He wrote.

"It is my fundamental principle that all things are a part or portion of God and that the nature of things is the substantial spirit of God."

Quoted in 'God is no thing', Richard Boeke

He is by no means alone in this belief. We can get a sense of what he meant from the Old Testament psalmists and prophets; and from mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, whose words formed the basis of our last hymn. For her, God is 'a supreme and fiery force that sends forth all the sparks of life'; which is in and of all life. Like Unitarianism, mysticism emphasizes a direct connection with a loving God, and the spiritual equality and/or unity of all peoples. At the heart of our common humanity is a universal spirit which binds us together in love. As Alistair Bate said, '*I-and-thee-and-we-and-tree, are One.*'

What might we do with our lives, what choices might we make, if they are right, and everything that exists is a part of God? If God is all there is, then there is nothing but lovingly sharing with the Divine in the many parts that it plays.

There comes a time to stop talking to God and to listen. To breathe in hope and exhale anger. To stop seeing the world as divided between "us and them." To the individual with Soul, there is always a third party to every encounter. You may call the third party Truth, or Love, or the Holy. But the sense of a greater Soul is essential to the health of our own soul. There is something bigger than the both of us.

God is no thing', Richard Boeke,

New research indicates that religious belief is ingrained in human

nature. We naturally look for causes of events – even babies as young as 9 months old can recognise that actions can cause a reaction. Anyone who has small children is aware of their continual search for reasons – ‘Why? What is that (horse, tree, fish) for?’ and that they are most content with explanations that involve design or purpose. It seems that there is a God-shaped space in our brains waiting to be filled with some sort of religious idea... though we can of course leave it empty if we wish!

Increasingly, our scientists can answer the question, ‘How?’ – they can take us back almost to the start of time. But they can’t answer ‘Why?’

If there is a ‘Why?’, any sort of reason for existence, it doesn’t really matter what we call it – God, supreme and fiery force, Father, Spirit of Live and Love, Yahweh, the Life Force. Our names will not kill it or change its creative power. And if there isn’t a ‘Why’ ... then I think Richard Boeke’s words are still valid. Living in love is all we can do.

Andy Pakula - Address

Excerpt of *Listening as Healing*, Margaret Wheatley

A young black South African woman taught some of my friends a profound lesson about listening. She was sitting in a circle of women from many nations, and each woman had the chance to tell a story from her life. When her turn came, she began quietly to tell a story of true horror--of how she had found her grandparents slaughtered in their village. Many of the women were Westerners, and in the presence of such pain, they instinctively wanted to do something. They wanted to fix, to make it better, anything to remove the pain of this tragedy from such a young life. The young woman felt their compassion, but also felt them closing in. She put her hands up, as if to push back their desire to

help. She said: "I don't need you to fix me. I just need you to listen to me."

She taught many women that day that being listened to is enough. If we can speak our story, and know that others hear it, we are somehow healed by that. During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa, many of those who testified to the atrocities they had endured under apartheid would speak of being healed by their own testimony. They knew that many people were listening to their story. One young man who had been blinded when a policeman shot him in the face at close range said: "I feel what has brought my eyesight back is to come here and tell the story. I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now it feels like I've got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story."

Sermon

A few months ago, I shared a meal with a Baptist ministry student. We were at theological college and in that environment, conversations – like island weather - could change very quickly. We were talking about something banal like the food on offer that day and suddenly we were talking about miracles.

The food was certainly no miracle, so I don't think there was a connection there, but I found myself in a rather intense exchange about miraculous healing. My Baptist colleague was plainly broken-hearted. He was despondent. Miraculous healings were not happening in the congregation he led. They happened for Jesus – why not for him?

So, here I was in a conversation that felt to me absolutely surreal. I truly felt for my colleague. His sense of his own ability – his

own vocation – his life’s work and his understanding of his identity were all being called into question. It was shaking him to his core – everything that he was living for was being undermined.

And at the same time I wanted to scream ‘get real!’ I wanted to shake him and explain the nature of metaphor and parable. “It will all be OK if you don’t take it so literally!” But there was no use in that. There would be no gentle way to change his perspective. I could offer no healing for his crisis. Or could I?

I don’t believe in the sort of miraculous healing that is described in the bible and in the scriptures of various other religions – the kind where the holy man or woman cures blindness or lameness with a touch or a look – or maybe even with the right words.

If you do believe in such healing, you may be right and me wrong. I want to hear about it. I’d be very happy to be proved wrong, despite the massive reconsideration of belief that I’d have to do... Like everyone else, I could use some healing and I certainly wouldn’t mind if it was fast and painless...

But miraculous or not, I do believe in healing. And I know it’s not limited to Jesus or the Buddha – and it’s certainly not limited to the Baptists.

Come, dream a dream with me,
come, dream a dream with me,
come, dream a dream with me,
that I might know your mind.

And I'll bring you hope when hope is hard to find,
and I'll bring a song of love and a rose in the winter time.

As your minister, I want each of you – and I include those who are here for the first time today as well as those who have been here a long time – I want you to know that I am available for you when you need me. Phone me and I will do my best to be there.

Understand though that I am not – as some religions would have it – your channel to the divine. I am not God’s admin who can get you access if you say the right things. Unitarianism has always held that clergy have no special access to holiness – we are heirs to a tradition that emphasises the “ministry of all believers” – the ministry of each one of us to the other. Now that we live in a network world – a web world – perhaps it becomes easier to accept our individual connections with the sacred element of life. We don’t need to go through channels to ask for access - the sacred is in the nodes where we intersect. It is here among us.

I am not here to bring the sacred to you, but to help you bring the sacred to each other. Our community can be a place where ministry is something that every one of us offers to each other. My role is not only to minister to you, but to help create a community where each of us ministers to the others – a community of healing and a community of wholeness.

Does this sound daunting? Surely, it is countercultural. When we go to get medical care, we expect to be treated by a doctor – not by other patients. When we attend a class, it’s the teacher we expect to provide the learning – not the other students.

This is different. This place is different. This is the place where we commit to one another – where we know that the more we care for each other, the more we ourselves will grow. The more we offer healing, the more we receive it ourselves.

There may be something quite intimidating in what I’m saying. It may seem unrealistic. You may be thinking “how am I to offer healing to someone else?” “How am I to help another on a path that I haven’t found for myself?”

A great truth was once told to me in some simple instructions for offering care and support in times of crisis and grief: “Don’t just do something. Stand there!”

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Christian writer of the 20th century authored a book entitled "The Wounded Healer," borrowing Carl Jung's label for the power of our own woundedness to help in the healing of others. If we think we must be fully whole, to help another find their wholeness, we have got it backwards.

Nouwen wrote "The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares." It is also a friend who heals.

Healing is often not about what we do. We offer healing through the quality of our attention and care. As Margaret Wheatley concluded about the experience of being with a woman whose grandparents were slaughtered in South Africa: "She taught many women that day that being listened to is enough. If we can speak our story, and know that others hear it, we are somehow healed by that."

Here is poem written by Nick Penna:

When you listen you reach into dark corners and pull out
your wonders.
When you listen, your ideas come in and out like they were
waiting in line.
Your ears don't always listen.
It can be your brain, your fingers, your toes.
You can listen anywhere.
Your mind might not want to go.
If you can listen you can find answers to questions you didn't
know.
If you have listened, truly listened, you don't find your self
alone.

I have to tell you that the author of this poem was 10 or 11 years old when he wrote it. "If you have listened, truly listened, you don't find your self alone."

We are not alone, but we often act like we are, we believe that we are, we come to think we can not know our part of the interconnectedness of life. We can know that connection. Listening, a loving quality of attention - is a way that brings our togetherness to light. When we have truly listened, we know that we, the listener and the listened, are not alone.

Listening builds relationship. True, open, deep listening is the way we create and show love, and love heals.

A group of Unitarians in the US was asked how their congregation had been a healing community for them. Here are a few of the things they said:

"The dear ones I have been blessed to connect with here love me for who I am and give me the strength to learn to love myself, be compassionate with myself..."

It helps just to know that others know something of one person's struggles.

This is a place where I can be vulnerable, imperfect and forgiven.

This congregation allows me to be sad or happy with no judgment or pressure. I feel clean and good when I leave.

During the intense care-giving and ultimate death of my partner..., I was able to continue and get through each day because I had this community, the very strong feeling of being not alone throughout it all. Listening was so valuable. Such a gift!"

I don't know if healing miracles began to occur in my Baptist colleague's congregation. I sincerely hope they have. I expect that they have been there all along, only not the kind he was looking for.

I know that our power to heal grows as we take our rightful place in a community of healing. "When we come to it" we recognize that we "have the power to fashion for this earth a climate where every man and every woman can live freely ... Without crippling fear"

The same hands that so easily wound, "can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness"

"We must confess that we are the possible."

"We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world"

May it be so.

Comments -

We welcome your comments on this issue. With your permission your comments might also be included in the NUF Newsletter.

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