

Reflection for Sunday 5th July 2020

Bible passages: Matthew 11:16 – 19 and 25 – 30. Romans 7:15 – 25a

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Could you tell an electron from a positron or a neutron from a photon? Would you know the difference if – so to speak ---one came knocking at your door? The 20th and 21st centuries have seen enormous leaps forward in scientific attempts to identify and understand what the basic building blocks of life might be. Once upon a time the atom held the crown, but it is long since deposed by sub-atomic particles such as electrons. They too were superseded by quarks --- whatever they might be --- and most recently the Higgs Boson particle has stolen the limelight. As a non-scientist – the best understanding that I have of the Higgs-Boson particle is that it is in relationship with all sub-atomic particles and that it is from this relationship that these particles get their mass.

These discoveries have potential consequences for just about every area of life and they are – I guess – not least of importance in medical science --- deepening the understanding of how we function as life forms – what is going on when we contract diseases --- and adding to the toolbox available to try to counter said diseases.

That said --- it has emerged very clearly from the period of lockdown --- that our physical and mental health is not just to do with anatomy / physiology / biochemistry and the like. Health and wellbeing clearly depend upon other things, such as society; relationships, interaction with creation --- and other humans as part of that creation. Not least do these elements of life bring stimulation – they also bring hope --- and without hope life is terminally diminished --- our human condition is critically reduced. If sub-atomic particles get their mass from relationship with the Higgs Boson particle --- then we humans get something equally essential to our being – from relationships with the created order – including one another.

The Bible passages before us today have a great deal to do with the human condition.

In the Gospel passage Jesus exhibits a moment of deep human frustration as he exclaims ***“But to what will I compare this generation?”*** That word – generation --- is of course most immediately understood as those who are his contemporaries – but this frustration of God extends well beyond any single period of time. The word generation at its most literal – means that which has been made – created. This frustration applies to all humankind.

The words of Jesus which Matthew gives us are worth examining. Firstly, Jesus likens us to children and in his example of one group calling upon another to join their game – we see two elements of our human condition. One is that we want to be in control – we want to call the tune and to have others dance to our direction. That is fundamental.

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Equally – we are like those who are invited to dance. They refuse to join in. It brings to mind the truculent teenager in us all who doesn't know what he or she wants but knows that it isn't whatever anyone else might think is good for them.

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That element of fickleness – of lack of acceptance or humility – is emphasised when Jesus draws the contrast between the ascetic loner John [condemned as weird] and himself, sociable and enjoying a good meal and a glass of wine [condemned as debauched]. You are never satisfied --- Jesus seems to be saying.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul also exclaims out of frustration. ***“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” “I will what is right – but I cannot do it!”***

On Friday past I read of another outburst of frustration – this time from the author Ian Rankine --- dismayed by the way in which people have abused the parks of Edinburgh since lockdown eased. Many have been witnessed urinating in public – as a consequence of drinking – and when the crowds disperse there are left behind huge and disgusting piles of litter. ***“What is it? I don't know. Is there a generation that's just got used to people cleaning up after them?”*** he is quoted as saying. ***“Or have they been locked down for so long, they're just focused on themselves and entertaining themselves and they've got no thought for tomorrow, or no thought for what happens to this rubbish?”***

Rankine speaks for many of us – not just in Edinburgh. The issue he highlights emphasises the common problem of a distinction between individual preference or priority --- over against communal need – the welfare of others – and indeed all creation. We might characterise it in another way. Selfishness over against concern for our neighbour.

Yet some who have given this area sustained and deep consideration would argue that the distinction which is truly important is a deeper one. Professor Rowan Williams --- surely one of the greatest intellects of our age --- points to the distinction between the individual and the person. Many people suggest that much which currently ails the world stems from a loss of confidence in and a lack of shared understanding about what it means to be a human person – what is our true condition – what are we for – what is life really about?

Professor Williams echoes others when he says that there has been so much focus on the individual— individual rights – preferences – that we have falsely identifies the individual as the base building block

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of society. We have begun to think of the individual as an autonomous – self-contained world – and that we understand society as being the bouncing off one another of all these individuals – seeking to make our own path in the chaos that is the jumble of billions of other individuals.

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But --- says Williams – we are not self-contained individuals --- we are persons --- and to have any hope of living together harmoniously then we have to understand that a person is something quite different to a self-contained particle. We have – says Williams – not yet achieved a language for understanding and describing what it means to be a person – or indeed the concepts and constructs within which to use that language but it is quite clear that we are much closer to an accurate understanding and description when we say that a person is a place of interaction --- a place of relationships – and as such – organic and constantly moving – changing. Without these relationships we have no identity as it is from them that we draw life.

Recently I have been privileged to spend time with our grand-daughter Sofia – now 9 months old. Out of the tiny and utterly dependent baby – there is emerging a little person – not yet with language --- but a person undoubtedly. It is deeply moving and overwhelming to look in the eye of a young child. There is a depth there – an unknown there – which goes far deeper than just the relationships she has with her family and the world. It was looking into Sofia's eyes and having that experience which prompted me to revisit the lovely little book by Professor Rowan Williams entitled "Being Human". It's in that book that he draws out the distinction between an individual and a person – and it is that book that he points to the Christian belief that the fundamental relationship from which we all take our identity as persons – is that which we have – know it or not – with the one who made us – God. That – I think he would say – is what I see in Sofia's eyes – her often inscrutable gaze.

Towards the end of the Gospel today we find the familiar invitation of Jesus ***"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; --"*** It is an invitation to relationship with God --- an invitation to enter that relationship willingly and fully. It is not made for God's benefit --- so that God can rule us and lord over us. It is made for our benefit – because it is in that relationship alone --- that we can discover what it means to be us – human beings – persons made in the image of God. And it is in that discovery that lies the true hope for humankind.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.