

Ministers-at-Work

The Journal for Christians in
secular ministry

Number 117

April 2011

To help ourselves and others to celebrate the presence of God and the holiness of life in our work, and to see and tell the Christian story there.

CHRISM is the National Association of CHRistians In Secular Ministry

for all Christians who see their secular employment as their primary Christian ministry, and for those who support that vision.

To further this aim, CHRISM publishes a quarterly journal, releases occasional papers and organises an annual retreat. Conferences are held regularly and worldwide links pursued.

CHRISM welcomes members, both lay and ordained, from all Christian denominations, encourages them to be active within their own faith communities and to champion ministry in and through secular employment. If you would like confidential support as an MSE, please contact any member of the Committee (see inside rear cover).

Further information about CHRISM may be obtained from the Secretary or other members of the Committee

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Please e-mail contributions to: Mike.Rayner@dph.ox.ac.uk

Editorial

At last: the April 2011 edition of Ministers-at-Work. You'll have no doubt noticed that the date on which you receive your copy of Ministers-at-Work now bears very little relationship to the date on the front cover! Sorry is all I can say. But all this is about to change with the election of a new Journal Editor – Peter Johnson – at this year's CHRISM Annual General Meeting held on 16th July 2011. The next (July!) edition of Ministers-at-Work – which I am hoping we'll be sending you shortly - will be edited by Peter and me jointly. In that edition Peter will introduce himself and I'll be saying farewell.

As you will see, this April edition is a special edition, without some of the usual features of Ministers-at-Work. It's based upon what happened at this year's CHRISM reflective weekend which was held at Holland House, Cropthorne between the 25th and 27th February and which was led by Donald Eadie. This special edition contains Donald's notes for his introductions to the four sessions he led and then four different responses to the weekend.

I am very grateful to Donald for his permission to include his notes. I think they say some very profound things. You may have to do some of your own thinking to make the connections between the content of this edition and ministry in secular employment but I think there are many connections to be made. I hope you will find this special edition as stimulating and useful as I found the weekend!

Mike Rayner

NB: CHRISM Reflective Weekend 2012

This will take place from 17th – 19th February 2012 at:
The Briery Retreat Centre,
38 Victoria Avenue,
Ilkley, W Yorks, LS29 9BW.

Details from Rob Fox (e-mail: rob.foxesbridge@tiscali.co.uk)

CHRISM Reflective Weekend 2011: Minding the Threshold

This took place at Holland House, Crothorne, Worcestershire, between the 25th and 27th February 2011 and was led by Donald Eadie.

Four reflections at the weekend provided by Donald Eadie

1. Introducing the weekend

I am glad to be with you again, I feel at home among you. This time we gather from around the country without the deep snow of four years ago. Now we have crocuses and daffodils, snowdrops and primroses, the swelling of magnolia buds and the songs of birds.

The shape of the weekend and some of the expectations

This weekend we are attempting to combine retreat and also a different form of relational engagement!

My intention is to open up three themes: the nature of transformation, the nature of providence and the nature of blessing.

I am slowly learning that 'less is more'. The reflections will be brief, nudgings with pauses, somewhat disconnected yet inter-linked, bits of stories, borrowed wisdom, poetry, prayers, and biblical stories. And hopefully, with the help of the Spirit, they will touch and also draw us into an exploration of 'the mystery of things.' We'll share in different ways over the weekend, drawing on our own context and life experience.

In introducing these sessions I will not be giving you talks, but inter-linked fragments. What I offer comes mostly from 12 books of recent jottings clustered together for pondering!

A personal word.

The last year or so has felt like a turning time, an awareness of inner re-alignment, a willingness to offer my 'yes' to the next stage of the journey and the desire to be still growing within it all, more alive. I manage less of those things which by nature and appetite I used to engage in. I wonder about the different worlds you inhabit and where our very different worlds meet.

Between 1987 and 1996 I was the Birmingham Methodist District Chairman until I retired early due to my spinal condition. My journey has been away from the centre of the busy life of the church to the edge, beginning nearly 15 years ago. It was paradoxically, a journey deeper into the heart of things. It was unexpected, unwanted and yet became a frightening liberation.

What were my fears at the beginning? They were:

The letting go of identity, role and relationships;

Living with the new aloneness, the new silence, the new limitation;

Living with feelings of marginalisation and abandonment;

And living with the death of the old life, and not being able to imagine a new life with meaning and purpose.

During this time Gerry Hughes, a Jesuit priest, came to visit me and we began to explore what was happening and to interpret the meaning. He accompanied me in this way for nearly 10 years. He helped me both to build a bridge into the future and later to let go of dreams and wishes, and to face the emptiness and the waiting within weakness.

Waiting with openness for what is new is not easy. In this experience we become pilgrims. Gerry spoke of the journey from the centre into the borderlands (gränsområdena). 'The

borderlands,' he said, 'are the place of exploration and discovery, they are the new centre.'

'There will be new companions,' a wise old friend promised. And to my great surprise and joy this has been true. I have met wonderful people I never knew existed. I have also encountered prophetic communities. Much of my time was, and still is lived in a loved room. And people began to come to the room, not for counselling or therapy but as those who are also pilgrims within the borderlands, just as I had experienced with Gerry.

Some seek the life-giving presence of God within this wondrous and terrifying world, and within the story of our lives. Others seek help to live their faithfulness to God within complex and ambiguous situations. Some are bruised and oppressed through different forms of religious bullying yet live with a poignant sense of the 'otherness' and the intimacy of God, and ask if this is enough. Others appear to be beyond the reach of the Church yet have spiritual needs and ask faith questions.

'This room has become my Church,' one person said. But months later: 'No,' she said, 'the world has become my Church.' Physical limitation, perhaps even divine calling, brings some of us to a marginalised place. It becomes a conversion experience.

A Dutchman, a director of mission from Rotterdam also visited my room. He spoke of our listening to the voices of people and communities on the margins in society as the mission priority. 'The borderlands,' he said, 'are the context where God's Spirit works to convert the Church.'

Richard Holloway in his book *Doubts and Loves* helped me to recognise the significance of the special chair I use, because of my spinal condition, for my new vocation. He opens his book with these words: 'Some years ago I copied into my note book an aphorism from a Russian writer called V.V. Rozanov: 'All religions will pass, but this remains: simply sitting in a chair and looking in the distance.'" I would like to reverse Rozanov's claim and suggest that religion will remain as long as we sit in a chair looking in the distance.

2. The nature of transformation

Within our Easter Eucharistic liturgy we live and pray with this phrase: 'May the whole earth be transformed by mercy and rejoice in hope.' And within the theme for a recent Assembly of the World Council of Churches: 'God, in your grace transform the world.'

*

There is much talk of late of transformation, rippling, erupting, imploding, through the countries of North Africa and the Middle East and also within David Cameron's Big Society in the UK. I wonder about the nature of transformation.

*

'Did you know that when a caterpillar goes into a chrysalis to become a butterfly it disintegrates completely into liquid, that there is nothing of the original body that remains intact? Each molecule of the soup must remember what it has been and also what it is to become...' This I learnt from a woman who told me that for years she had been shrivelled up as one who had died, like a dead chrysalis, but now she is crawling out like butterfly learning to fly as for the first time.

*

God's call, says Paul is to be drawn into the mystery of the Body of Christ, to share in his life, suffering, death and resurrection. The power of the resurrection, Paul says, is only experienced through suffering and the cross. This perplexing mystery belongs to the way of God in the world.

*

Rowan Williams speaks of, 'vulnerability as the heart of transformation'. The uniting of three Church traditions in Sweden has led to many questions: 'How to hold the paschal mystery, the suffering, dying and resurrection of Jesus, as the heart of the

creation of the new Church?' and, 'How to form congregations where we are strong enough to bring our weakness, open enough to bring our different experiences of pain, and hopeful enough to recognise that these could also be transforming gifts?'

*

My brother John was, in his time, a huge rugby prop forward and still looks like one. We are both adopted. There is between us, he says, a bond deeper than blood, an intimacy within our real difference of nature.

When our father was dying John said: 'I can't do the being with Dad bit – you do it.' Years later, when Diane, his wife, was dying, he did do it, beautifully, tenderly, honestly, with no pious frills. He lived his own humanity, discovered the human being he could be, discovered the human being we are when we face the things we can't handle. There was a mellowing empathy which has remained within the years of grieving.

*

Chris and Mike were our neighbours, both retired head teachers. Over coffee one morning they spoke of morph and morphing in the context of an unruly class of children and in a staff room where colleagues hang against the walls, distant from each other, out of sorts, chuntering, alienated. And we spoke of those catalysts which mysteriously release a chemical dynamic in a class room, in a staff room.

*

Laura is a process artist engaged in doctoral studies. On one visit she spoke about the hidden tunnels under the Mersey filled with rubbish and her application to exhibit there, to take items of rubbish and in imagination to follow the stories. She talked about the transformation of stuff that people want to throw away and hide. And she also spoke of a philosopher called Levinas and sent me some of his writing which so excite her that she wants to share them. I've booked in another tutorial.

Susi, a former nurse in Afghanistan, now in a wheel chair tells of the time when she washed the feet of Barbara Clair, formerly mother superior of the Wantage Sisters, and how it was a transforming experience. And I asked, 'for whom?'

*

What of friendship, and what I wonder, of the transforming friendship of Jesus?

*

Pierce says, 'It is not uncommon to hear of people who, because of a sense of deep suffering in their own lives, experience a dramatic spiritual transformation, a mystical break through, which gives birth to compassion and solidarity toward the suffering of the peoples of the world.'

*

For Jesus the prime metaphor for the mystery of transformation is the sign of Jonah (Matthew 16: 4 and 12: 39).

*

She spoke of her awareness of being into 'the last furlong, a moving from all who I am toward what I have not yet become.'

I am learning that within our incompleteness, weariness, decline, forgetfulness, contraction, stripping, there is, an inner yielding toward something more profound, a 'yes' to the next stage of the journey, a consenting, a desire to be still growing within it all, more alive within the present moment, a being drawn more deeply into the life of God who waits for us.

And within this complexity, a return to simplicity, playfulness, gazing, and 'the joy of the present moment in the land of forgetfulness.'

'This,' Thomas Keating writes, 'is the terrain of transformation, the trusting into the unimaginable beyond, the consent to be transformed.'

*

Peter in his MA thesis on the spirituality that emerges from impairment speaks of 'dangerous gifts,' challenging the traditional view of God and also of God's world, threatening gifts which could transform.

Openness to receive the gifts of God through encounters which may threaten us also includes the possibility of transformation, as Simon Peter discovered in his encounter with the Gentile, Cornelius (Acts 10: 1-48) and as Jesus discovered with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4: 1-15).

In the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and Simon Peter's difficulty in accepting this, it is as if Jesus is saying to us, 'If you are not able to receive you can no longer be a disciple of mine' (John 13: 1-20).

*

And from deep within our Easter Eucharistic liturgy: 'May the whole earth be transformed by mercy and rejoice in hope.'

3. The nature of providence

Archbishop William Temple is recorded as saying: 'Pray for me I ask you, not chiefly that I may be wise and strong, or any other such thing, though, for these things I need your prayers. But pray for me chiefly that I may never let go of the unseen hand of the Lord Jesus.'

*

Some of those who come to see me speak hesitantly of their sense of the mystery of things almost with embarrassment, because they reach for a vocabulary beyond the language of traditional piety. Within the hiddenness there is a beneficent unfolding, unanticipated, connecting, surprising, and promptings, guidance, and of being drawn into a future beyond, other than that which we may have planned, prayed for, longed for.

Some speak of providence. Francis Young, formerly Professor of Theology at Birmingham University, while talking together of providence, reminded me of the story of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 45: 4-9) receiving his brothers and urging them not to grieve. Out of all the deceit, betrayal, trickery, confusion, sinfulness God brings good things, including reconciliation and food for the people of Egypt.

Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me' and they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine in the land has been in the land two years; and there will be five more years in which there will be no more ploughing nor harvest. It was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh.'

*

We have watched in recent days exhausted refugees pouring out of Libya into Tunisia and out of Tunisia into Egypt and, at the border crossings, being met with people working for the Red Cross who gave them bread and water.

*

Karen Armstrong, the former nun, during the period when she was living within the wreckage of her Catholic beliefs, speaks of her being delivered, saved by an odd atheistic couple and their severely disabled son.

*

I recall listening to Benjamin Britten's haunting oratorio telling the journey of Abraham into the mountains in the land of Moriah intent on sacrificing his son Isaac.

'And Abram looked up and saw a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burned offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'on this mount of the Lord it shall be provided'.' (Genesis 22: 1-19)

*

A theology of providence raises many questions. Lorna is 96 and lives in Bristol. We speak for an hour by phone on a Friday or Saturday every couple of weeks. She stands, she says, at the door into the future. She is re-reading, savouring the treasures of literature, novels, poetry, theology, spirituality.

And now thoughtfully, lovingly handing over some of the books which have inspired, illumined and sustained her. She is, though she would wince at my speaking of her thus, a contemplative, a mystic, alive, intelligent, intuitive, humble, attentive, generous. 'I've had a wonderful life, am very fortunate, very thankful,' she says. 'Things have happened in my life that I would not have chosen.' Her husband, Graham, died when their three children were young. 'God does not protect us from what others have to experience; reality can be very ugly, bestial. We see through a glass darkly.'

She ponders Teilhard de Chardin's testimony to 'the all embracing providence.' 'Your all embracing providence which shows me at each moment, by the day's events, the next step to take and the next rung to climb. I shall respond by my care never to miss an opportunity of rising 'toward the level of the Spirit.'

And from Martin Buber: 'Of God moving anonymously on the inside of life.' And she quickly adds, 'and this is for all of us, whether we recognise it or not; things will happen in a sort of sequence – not just accidentally, as if there is another hand at work.'

And from William Temple: 'When I pray, co-incidences happen. When I don't they don't.'

And from St Augustine: 'Unto Him who is everywhere, we come by love and not by navigation.'

And from Evelyn Underhill who speaks of 'the great tide of His undimmed vitality that breaks in beauty on the world's wide beach.'

*

Inez came from Barbados in the 1960s and had worked for 35 years on the London Underground. On her last day at work she was called into the Inspector's office at Edgware Road Station. Gently he looked back over the years with her. He made a cup of tea, and so with others found a ritual to say thank you.

Before returning to Barbados and to her family Inez reminded the congregation in Notting Hill of a Bible study on the book of Exodus and the testimony to the discovery of manna in the wilderness and how she had said: 'And we know what manna is, we who are far from home, we who are in the wilderness place.' Then she read her poem entitled 'Manna.' Inez died near her old family home near the sea in Barbados last year.

*

We are promised 'bread for the day' so don't be anxious for the morrow.

We bring our discovery of bread on the edge and wells of water under our feet, in desert and destitution as did both Elijah (1 Kings 17: 1-7) and the slave girl Hagar before us (Genesis 21: 8-20). Consecrated food from heaven is not confined to lie under white cloths in our churches.

*

I am learning that God's providence is wonderful in its unfolding and perplexing in its withholding. William Sloan Coffin testifies to God providing 'minimum protection and maximum support'. William Cowper in one of his hymns speaks to 'a frowning providence.' And I was asked by someone who turned at the door when leaving: 'Can we talk one day of 'bridled providence'?'

After a bad car accident Michael Wilson wrote this poem entitled: 'The answer's no.'

Heralding dawn
A song thrush is shot by a youngster for fun.
O maker of both
Could you not wobble the aim of a gun
For a song?

Two cars
Speed towards one another
Head on:
The driver of one is asleep.
O patron saint of drivers
Could you not nudge him awake
Just in time?

A tiny child
Chases a bouncing ball
Into the road.
Drinking driver brakes too late.
O guardian angel of battered body
Could you not trip a toddler on the kerb?

*

I wonder about the mystery of synchronicity - what Lorna calls, 'little subterranean connectings, circles being completed.' I question if there is such a thing as coincidence.

In her old age Doris lived in a large room in Notting Hill. Her neighbour, a French woman, gave her a print of George de La

Tour's painting of Joseph in the carpenter's shop watched by his son. Her parting gift to me was a print of the same painting. And years later I learned that my birth father was called Joseph and had been a master builder. Our granddaughter, Maya, is attending a secondary school in Hackney, Haggerstone, in the same road as my birth father was born and where he lived his growing years. Our eldest grandson is also called Joseph and naturally works well with wood and with the building of things.

Perhaps we are wise in our hesitation when speaking of the mystery of things, of beneficent unfolding, unanticipated, surprising, connecting, drawing us sometimes into a future other, to that which we may have planned, prayed for, longed for.

4. The nature of blessing

There have been reasons within recent years to wonder about the nature of God's blessings, and also the rituals for blessing which all sorts and conditions of people now seek: the something more which honours the intent and sacredness of their holy ground, and which we in turn increasingly are invited to bring into being, compassionately and imaginatively.

*

The context of my reflection on blessing emerges from deep friendship with a minister in the Church of South India. He was born into humble circumstances; in later years became a theologian/scholar, renowned worldwide for his teaching and writing on Hinduism and Christianity. He obtained his doctorate in Cambridge. He taught in two of our theological colleges in Britain. It was during this period that depression returned and brought him low for over two years. Prior to his return to India last year to teach in Chennai there was a Eucharist with prayers of blessing.

*

I've never met Sandy Ryrle yet he has become a good friend, a soul friend. He is a priest in the Episcopal Church of Scotland, a Hebrew scholar, and we meet through the letters we write to each other and also through his books. In recent months he has drawn my attention to the God who blesses, God who is the source of all blessing. 'The nature of God's blessing,' he says, 'is the offering of health and well being.'

And the work of God is hidden and slow and to be trusted.

'There is within blessing a double response. Blessing is something God does for us, always taking the initiative, but blessing is also something we do for God.'

'Bless the Lord oh my soul,
And all that is within me praise his Holy name,
Praise the Lord oh my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.'

(Psalm 103: 1-2)

And our being blessed includes a double action. The blessed become a source of blessing to others. So with Abraham and Sarah setting off toward a far country: 'I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing.' (Genesis 12:3)

The story of Jacob and his brother Esau is one of great poignancy and complexity, a primal story of the human condition and within it the search for blessing. It keeps on unfolding and connecting within the heights and depths of our inter-related humanity. In the place of hiding and dread, Jacob dreams at Bethel of the ladder set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and of the angels of God ascending and descending'. And when he woke from his sleep, Jacob says, 'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.' Bethel: a place of unanticipated blessing (Genesis 28: 10-22).

And at the Jabbok river, his family and cattle having safely crossed, Jacob remains alone, alone and yet not alone, the place of inner wrestling through the night until daybreak also becomes the place

of blessing. 'I will not let you go unless you bless me,' Jacob says to his combatant. The touching place, and this is hard for us, is also the place of wounding, of crippling.

And the place of naming, 'What is your name?' he is asked, and he said, 'Jacob.' 'You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel,' was the reply (Genesis 32: 22- 32). And now numb with fear, Jacob limps across the Jabbok river and journeys toward his brother Esau, the brother he had deceived and wronged. And Jacob lifts his downcast gaze to see his brother Esau, running toward him. Esau embraces him, falls on his neck and kisses him and they weep.' And Jacob says to his brother Esau: 'Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God-since you have received me with such favour.' (Genesis 33: 1-11)

*

In Rowan Williams's book *Open to Judgment* there is a remarkable university sermon for All Saints Day. He draws his inspiration from Abbe Huvelin, an obscure priest who lived nearly all his ministry in a parish in Paris, a man who lived with physical suffering and also with depression, a man of rare understanding, a gifted spiritual director. 'The work of a priest,' he said, 'was to recognise the Spirit of God in those who came to him, many of whom were repelled by the official Church.'

Rowan Williams shows not only how dread, humiliation, emptiness, dereliction, can draw us nearer to the experience of our Lord in his suffering but also can release what he calls 'intelligent compassion for the hurt of others.'

'If the 'wretched of the earth' are to hear the gospel,' Rowan Williams writes, 'perhaps they will only be able to hear it from those who are themselves victims, diminished people who have understood their poverty, through the gifts they have themselves received in the compassionate company of Jesus' family and body.'

'The only preachers,' he says, 'the only lovers, with anything to say will be the ones who can make their own, the frustration of the

despised, because they have recognised-with tears, with irony, with anger perhaps, but also with acceptance, their poverty.' 'These are the preachers who can speak a gospel which is never a word of condescending encouragement from the possessors to the dispossessed, but the generation of a new community, the fellowship of poor women and men, at work to make each other rich, to make each other human.' 'This,' he says, 'is the context of the communion of saints, on earth and beyond, nourishing each other, because nourished by the poor Christ.'

And this perhaps is why we are drawn to the testimony of those who live within the foolishness of the beatitudes, the contradictions of the blessed:

The uncomfortable comforters,
The wrestlers, perhaps raging makers of peace,
The silenced ones whose carved faces are stained with tears
both of grief and joy,
The hungry and thirsty who long to see right prevail in a
world of corrupt plenty,
The diminished who are enlarged,
The downtrodden who walk tall,
The impoverished who make others rich.

These are the salt of the earth. These are the broken ones through whom light shines, life flows. In all the earth, Jesus says, these are the blessed.

*

Within our 1st Methodist Eucharistic Order there is a beautiful offertory prayer:

Lord and giver of every good thing
We bring to you
Bread and wine for our communion
Lives and gifts for your kingdom
All for transformation through your grace and love
Made known in Jesus Christ our Saviour

'All for transformation' has become as a mantra.

What we experience as lostness, emptiness, abandonment, humiliation, pain and rejection, all belong to what we offer into the hands of Christ. What we experience as shame, anger, frustration, fear and anxiety, all belong to what we offer into the hands of Christ. All is for transformation, through the slow, hidden work of God. Suffering and death and resurrection, we learn, are all mixed and not to be kept within separate compartments.

*

In that Eucharist with blessing for our Indian friends we 'did the blessing' in a way which most of us had never shared in before. And among the words these:

'May you be blessed by God,
And also may you bless God,
And forget not all his benefits.
May you be blessed by God,
And also become a blessing for others.
May the spirit first seen to be at work in Jesus of Nazareth
Also be seen to be at work among you,
Amen'

*

Somewhere Else is the name of a bread making project in Bold Street on the 2nd floor of a block of shops in the centre of Liverpool. It began with those who inhabit the streets, asylum seekers, refugees, big issues sellers. And the embrace widened to include people with mental health problems, people who have experienced some form of abuse, students, and a local policeman. A book emerged that shares something of the miracle which is bread making.

The book is called *Mixed up Blessing* and was launched at Somewhere Else and I phoned the author who is a friend and she in turn passed the phone around the table. And people spoke of how they came to be at the bread-making place. And I said to one young woman, 'You are very lucky' and she replied, 'Not lucky, blessed.'

Responses to the Reflective Weekend

1, A poem – Dorrie Johnson

A reflection based on the programme headings:

Thresholds
Transformation
Providence (and wonder)
Blessings

Gathering to take a risk before God

Gathering,
we came on wheels, on foot,
into the fold of Holland House.
A round of introductions,
brief and difficult to hold,
sped us round the country through eyes -
maybe a little cynical with experience,
but wise with insight.

Gathering
to find the ifs and wheres
of thresholds that we had to cross,
stumbling perception of Isaiah's
word of warning
that weal and woe
come from the loving God;
embrace a moment,
waiting for it to glow
in revelation
or sit in a chair looking into the distance.

Gathering
to reflect on transformation,
courage for metamorphosis
to the completely new,
or perhaps the fragile opening
of possibilities,
consenting to the process
of change;
to consider the spread of ripples,
their gentle touching,
their scouring cross currents;
or to watch a pebble drop
with scant disturbance
except, maybe, momentary
distortion to new enlightenment,
- outward signs of inward grace;
a place, person, transformed
by mercy -
by the wages paid,
for hope to bring rejoicing.

Gathering
to absorb the gift
of providence,
inspiration, hope and mystery;
to wait for luck or destiny
to connect
with God's foreknowledge,
and our free will;
to see creation and sustaining
worked out in nature's wealth
and need;
our play of clay or words or music
into prayer, accepting
the endowment;
our sense of awe and wonder
for things that catch our breath.

Gathering
for blessing time,
for life and light and logos
to converge, to separate,
offering to the transforming
Spirit our lives and gifts,
constructs of imagination,
receiving, giving,
feeling trepidation,
lost in exaltation,
face to face in humility and love.
May God bring out the best in you.

Gathering
for sustenance of body
with stories shared beside the toaster,
mouth watering desserts;
laughter rolling round carved wood,
conversation crossing tables;
Fairly traded coffee, eco-harmony,
'green charter' house,
warm and welcoming.
The bed of cyclamens was in full bloom.

Gathering
in quiet times
for meditation or thanksgiving,
for silence or for praise,
for sharing or seclusion,
reflection or rejoicing
holding work
before the creator and redeemer,
sustainer and restorer;
sharing God's peace
in the shared wish
of God be with you.
Goodbye.

2. A sermon – Mike Rayner

Transformation

My theme today is transformation. I want to explore this theme by looking at the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17: 1-8; Mark 9: 2-13; Luke 9: 28-36) and what it tells us about the reality of transformation. But in the process I want to suggest that transformation cannot just be understood by looking just at the transfiguration but needs also be understood in the light of the crucifixion. But I also want to suggest that the transfiguration and crucifixion are intimately connected: to say that transformation is both glorious and painful.

But to start with: a bit about transformation in general: Karl Marx said that the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point, however is to change it. And Jesus came not only to help us understand the world but to change it. The gospel is good news – not only because it helps us make sense of things but because it changes everything. It is transformative.

Jesus gives his 'manifesto' for his ministry in a synagogue in Nazareth. You'll remember that he opened the scroll of the Book of Isaiah and read out the passage that we know as Chapter 61. He read out the words of the prophet and then told his listeners that they applied to him. He, in effect, said that he was the one that the prophet said would come to preach 'good news to the poor, the release of captives and recovery of the sight to the blind'. But, the prophet had foretold not just an excellent preacher, but one who would 'set at liberty those who are oppressed'. In other words: not just someone who would preach comforting words to the oppressed but someone who would actually do something about their oppression, someone who would liberate them, someone who would transform their lives. Jesus said he was that person.

Now this manifesto – as a manifesto - is somewhat unfinished. Yes I know that Jesus went on, not only to preach recovery of sight to the blind, but actually to heal blind people. Here he definitely put words into actions. There are, as you'll recall, lots of recorded

incidences of Jesus healing blind people. But what about the poor and the captives? Were any captives released during Jesus' ministry and where any poor people actually relieved of their poverty? It is tempting here to assume Jesus was speaking of spiritual poverty and captivity, spiritual oppression but I want to suggest otherwise, partly because of the story of the transfiguration.

So turning now to that story. It's set in the middle of Jesus' ministry at a point where he has transformed a lot of people's lives. It's not just the lives of the blind and the otherwise sick and disabled that Jesus has been transforming: it's the lives of virtually everyone he meets. His disciples end up having their lives turned upside down by following him. Even the lives of those who try to ignore him or oppose him end up being transformed: just think of what happens to Judas.

But in the story of the transfiguration it is not Jesus who is doing the transforming; it's Jesus who is seemingly transformed. But how can this be? Surely if Jesus was God then how can he be transformed? Most people think of God as unchangeable. Surely all that is happening here on the mountain is that people – well three disciples – Peter, James and John, and two others from Israel's history – Moses and Elijah – get to see Jesus for who he really is? Well this is part of the story but not the whole story.

I want to suggest that what happened on that mountain is a real story of transformation not just of revelation or indeed transfiguration – if by transfiguration all we mean is a change of appearance and not of anything substantial. And I think this firstly because the events on the mountain have a physical reality, there is a real mountain with real people as observers. There is a real change in the appearance of Jesus and a real voice from heaven which are seen and heard by the observers.

But important as the story of the transfiguration is, by itself, really changes nothing. OK Peter, James and John and perhaps Jesus himself have a wonderful spiritual experience but they have to come down off the mountain and indeed – according to all three

gospel writers – are immediately confronted by a really tricky problem with an epileptic child that the disciples who had been left at the foot of the mountain could not deal with. It seems to me that the transfiguration only makes sense in the context of the crucifixion and that there are deep connections between the two.

Of course the story of the transfigurations has lots of connections and resonances with other stories. It is not accidental that Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain that day. Both Moses and Elijah went up a mountain during their time on earth. This was in both cases Mount Sinai and there they both spoke with God. In Exodus we learn that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai his face shone – just as Jesus' face shone when he was transfigured. Moses and Elijah are the two most important characters in the Old Testament and so the story reinforces the connection between Jesus' ministry and both the Jewish Law (represented by Moses) and the prophecies of the Old Testament (represented by Elijah).

The story of the transfiguration not only resonates with Old Testament stories of Moses and Elijah but also with what happened at Jesus' baptism. Luke tells us that when Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist a voice came from heaven which said, 'Thou art my beloved son with thee I am well pleased'. The transfiguration is the only other occasion – according to Luke - where a voice comes from heaven, speaks directly to Jesus, and can be heard by the onlookers. This time the voice says, 'This is my son, my chosen, listen to him'. On both occasions the voice affirms that Jesus is God's son, i.e. is not just the chosen one that had been foretold by the prophets but one who has a unique relationship with God.

But the deepest connections are surely between the story of the transfiguration and that of the crucifixion – and I mean crucifixion not resurrection – even though the transfiguration seems a bit like a resurrection appearance. It is Matthew who draws out the parallels between the transfiguration and crucifixion most explicitly but they can also be seen in Luke and Mark. Matthew has the centurion at the foot of the cross saying, 'Truly this was the Son of God' just like the voice from heaven at the transfiguration. Matthew also has three female disciples at the foot of the cross –

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee just as there are three male disciples at the transfiguration – Peter, James and John.

Then there's the falling asleep business. In Luke's account of the transfiguration the disciples fall asleep on the mountain, just as they do in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus goes to pray just before his crucifixion. It's as if they are similarly overwhelmed by the significance and seriousness of the occasion.

But as well as similarities there are dramatic contrasts between the transfiguration and the crucifixion but even these dramatic contrasts have shared features. Here are five of these dramatic contrasts:

Firstly Jesus takes his friends with him, up a mountain for his transfiguration. For his crucifixion Jesus is taken by strangers to a hill having been abandoned by his friends.

Secondly at the crucifixion Jesus' clothes are stripped off and squabbled over: at the transfiguration Jesus' clothes are turned shiny white.

Thirdly the transfiguration is full of light – the light comes not just from Jesus' clothes but also from his face. His face shone like the sun - according to Matthew - and even the cloud out of which the voice from heaven came was 'bright'. The crucifixion on the other hand was full of darkness. Luke tells us that at the actual point of Jesus' death 'there was darkness over the whole land' and the sun's light failed.

Fourthly at the transfiguration there are two saints standing beside Jesus: at the crucifixion hang two robbers.

Finally Luke tells us that Jesus was glorified at the transfiguration and that the disciples woke to see his glory. But Jesus is also glorified – in a different – even opposite way - at his crucifixion as John in particular makes clear.

It is if we are looking at two pictures of the same thing with similar outlines but contrasting even opposite colours. 'If one scene were sketched on a transparency and placed over the other many of its lines would disappear.'¹ What is the significance of this?

Well: the two scenes represent the extremes of human experience. One speaks of betrayal and abandonment, mockery, suffering and death. The other speaks of good companionship and affirmation, of celebration, of life in all its fullness. So Jesus at his transfiguration and crucifixion embodies the whole spectrum of human possibility in one person. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why he has always been so attractive and inspiring. He shows forth in his own person both the extreme depths of pain and anguish we can know – and, what we all long for: a glorious life transformed by love for others and by complete intimacy with God. Jesus is the great illustration of both pain and hope. At his transfiguration he is humanity transformed and humanity glorified.

However Jesus is only temporarily transformed at his transfiguration. He can only permanently transform humanity through his crucifixion and resurrection.

This all has two consequences for how we view how we ourselves might be transformed.

First it means that our transformation is a real possibility. Just as Jesus was transfigured so we too can be transformed and in a way which makes a real difference to our lives. The physical reality of the transfiguration (and crucifixion) means that Jesus' manifesto is not just words only but a promise of actual change. It means that Jesus' manifesto is not just a spiritual manifesto – important as the spiritual life is – but a political manifesto where the good news is not just relief from spiritual oppression and spiritual poverty but actual physical oppression and actual physical poverty. It is clear that this manifesto has yet to be realised in its entirety but the reality of the transfiguration demonstrates the possibility.

1. Allison DC (2001) in: The Lectionary Commentary. The Third Readings: The Gospels. Ed. R E Van Harn. William B Erdman, pp 101-104.

Secondly seeing the transfiguration in the light of the crucifixion means that transformation without pain is impossible. Actually we all know this to some degree in our heart of hearts. The whole of life is in one sense a process of transformation where we undergo frequent changes – hopefully for the better – but change is always – to some extent at least – painful.

In the crucifixion we have both the example *par excellence* of how good can come out of suffering but also the promise that good will come out of suffering. The crucifixion and resurrection change everything.

Here finally are some words from the author Michael Wilson which are quoted in *Grain in Winter*, by Donald Eadie: 'The cross is not a rescue like the Exodus from an evil situation but salvation in and through a evil situation, first confronting it, then bearing it, then transforming it. It is as if evil is the raw material out of which new life is forged. The news of the gospel is not moral perfection nor sinlessness, it is forgiveness.' Through forgiveness and love evil is reversed and can be changed into good. 'Jesus is less interested in the causes of evil but in its transformation'.

A note on this sermon: I wrote this sermon several years ago. It was inspired in part by Donald Eadie's book, Grain in Winter, which was the subject of the first CHRISM Reflective Weekend I ever went on in 2003. I was inspired by that weekend. I met some amazing MSEs including, for the first and only time, Michael Ranken. And Dorrie Johnson said something to me which will always remain with me.

Donald wasn't physically present at that weekend but his book was and I think it's an absolutely fantastic book. There is a chapter in it on transformation which says similar but also different things to what he said at the 2011 CHRISM Reflective Weekend. My sermon (in a slight different edition) and two other sermons on transformation (one of which borrows heavily from what Donald said at the 2011 weekend) can be found on my blog at www.MikeRaynerSermons.blogspot.

3. Some jottings – Jim Cummins

Thoughts from 'The threshold'

Not long after I returned home from the CHRISM weekend - 'Minding the Threshold' * - at Cropthorne [by way of an entertaining railway journey, almost up to the standards of travel in World War Two: train cancelled from Evesham after many promises of mere delay; coach, eventually, to Worcester; after further delay a train (the last because all the Manchester line trains had been stopped for a strike) that took me to Hereford and Esther had to come and pick me up from there - pause for breath] I had a call from a student to enquire if she could come and look at our old farm buildings. She came a day or two later and so also, a short while after, came her tutor.

They were particularly interested in the old corn threshing floor in the middle of the range of buildings at the bottom of the fold. That length of building had puzzled me for years. When we first came here in the 1930s the old threshing machine would be pulled up against the north side of the building. The sheaves of oats would then be pitched up from inside, through the 'shutter-hole' (and I was allowed up onto the platform of the gigantic 'toy' where the 'bands' were cut and the sheaves fed into the drum, to pick up what fell on the floor and throw it in - not something that would be permitted these days!)

There was a much better place that might have been used for the job, or so I thought. Right in the middle of the building a massive pair of doors - more than 12ft wide and 12ft high - opened to the north side and opposite, on the other side, there was another identical pair, only slightly smaller, opening out to the South. But there was, immediately below the south doors, a vertical drop of three or four feet to the yard below. There was no chance of manoeuvring the big machine in there; it could not be taken in one side and out the other. Only quite recently has it been pointed out to me that the building was put up long before threshing machines had been invented or the motive power to drive them. The floor (of which very little still survives) of thick wooden boards belonged

to the age when threshing was done with a flail; and the buildings were designed so that the prevailing wind blew through, south to north, and the threshed corn, thrown in the air on broad wooden shovels would fall to the ground while the chaff would be blown out into the fold where the poultry could tidy it up. I found the visitors studying the big doorways, looking for grooves that would allow boards to be inserted to keep the grain back under cover - literally a 'thresh-hold'. I don't think they found what they were looking for; probably, I reflect, because there would never have been enough grain grown in this part of the world to justify such optimism!

I have been living on (or very close to) that threshold for so much of my life - and long may it last. But then there is another threshold here, also. Long ago, when Wales was a foreign country (even more foreign than it is today) King Offa, it seems, realised that he had gone far enough to the West, or he recognised that he could not get any further, and round about 750AD he had the Dyke thrown up to indicate the boundary. Today, Offa's Dyke still marks that line of separation, placed where possible along the ridges of the hills - inhospitable but good walking if you fancy a trek of 100 miles or so - from the estuary of the Severn to that of the Dee. Later, when the royal blood of the English and Welsh monarchs became intermingled, Wales became a Principality and eventually the border was moved to follow the river valleys - changed from the line of partition to become the place of bridges and of meeting.

Following the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand and then the vastly more devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan, I found myself turning again to James Lovelock and *The Revenge of Gaia*. Just in case you are unfamiliar with it I'll quote a bit following his mention of 'The threshold of irreversible change' that caught my eye.

"Jonathan Gregory and his colleagues at Reading University reported in 2004 that if global temperatures rise by more than 2.7 degrees C the Greenland glacier will no longer be stable and it will continue melting until most of it has gone, even if the temperatures fall below the threshold temperature. Because temperature and

carbon dioxide abundance appear to be closely correlated, the threshold can be expressed in terms of either of these quantities. The Hadley Centre scientists, Richard Betts and Peter Cox conclude that a rise in temperature globally of 4 degrees C is enough to destabilise the tropical rainforests and cause them, like the Greenland ice, to melt away and be replaced by scrub or desert. Once this happens the Earth loses another cooling mechanism, and the rate of temperature rise accelerates again."

In the first chapter Lovelock describes a simple model where the sensitive part of the Earth system is the ocean; as it warms, so the area of sea that can support the growth of algae grows smaller as it is driven ever closer to the poles, until algal growth ceases.

"The discontinuity comes because algae in the ocean both pump down carbon dioxide and produce clouds... The threshold for the failure of the algae is about 500 parts per million of carbon dioxide, about the same as it is for Greenland's unstoppable melting. At our present rates of growth we will reach 500ppm in about 40 years. The monitoring now in progress of all these crucial parts of the Earth system - Greenland, Antarctica, the Amazon forests and the Atlantic and Pacific oceans - shows a trend towards what on our timescale could be irreversible and deadly change. Indeed the science editor of the Independent newspaper, Steve Connor, reported on 16th September 2005 the statements of several climatologists who had found the melting of Arctic ice to be so rapid that we may have already passed the tipping point.

"Deadly it may be, but when we pass the threshold of climate change there may be nothing perceptible to mark this crucial step, nothing to warn that there is no returning. It is somewhat like the descriptions some physicists give to the imagined experience of an astronaut unlucky enough to fall into a massive black hole. The threshold of no return from a black hole is called the event horizon; once this distance from the centre of the hole is passed gravity is so strong not even light can escape. The remarkable thing is that the astronaut passing through would be unaware. There is no rite of passage for those passing thresholds or event horizons."

Those of us who can already look back a number of years to the 'three score years and ten' that was the traditional lifespan according to the psalmist, may expect to be gone before the calamity dawns on our planet - but we cannot be unaware, as we reflect that ours is the responsibility for introducing, even now, two or maybe three generations of our offspring to whatever trials or challenges are approaching.

It has been suggested that the Christian Church carries a heavy responsibility for the weight of population, too great for our present world to sustain. There are many who recognise God as love - and who see the creative joy of that love as being the source of this blessed and beautiful living planet. But through all the Christian centuries the focal point of our care and concern has been largely focussed on people - the human race. The needs of the whole of 'Creation' - the World on which we live in its totality - have been largely neglected or, worse, thoughtlessly exploited.

As long ago as 1954 Elspeth Huxley, in her book, *Four Guineas*, pointed to the unsustainable increase in the population of so much of Africa, thanks to the success of the doctors there. Medical Research Council workers estimated at that time that 50% of all children born in Gambia and many other parts of Africa die before the age of ten. Since then, as malaria, hook worm and other and other conditions of disease have been overcome, the level of infant mortality has been dramatically reduced. That raises the further problem: how can the increase in population be sustained; how are the people to be fed? Sadly, she concluded, "Doctors worship exclusively the God of life, and to him make innumerable sacrifices. Indians know better and render homage to Siva, the Destroyer, no less than to Vishnu, the Preserver and Brahma, Creator of all." Not a very satisfactory solution, one might think; but then it is not the only modern scientific development that may demonstrate 'the downside'. The 'fallout' from nuclear power for instance - especially when coupled with 'shifting of the tectonic plates' or the impact of climatic change as so recently witnessed - can be a less than healthy mix.

One relevant factor occurs to me and it relates to a very simple observation. Within the 'Third World' countries it seems that whatever skills are introduced or 'Aid' supplied, the problems remain, intractable, as populations continue to increase. Only in the 'Wealthy Nations' (of the 'First World') are populations decreasing. The implication is that the Third World should be enabled to cross that threshold and achieve the standard of wealth and well-being that we enjoy.

Ridiculous? I am reminded (as I have been frequently over many years) of a little Irish nursing Sister facing huge problems in an overcrowded London hospital where I was attending a course for hospital chaplains. I can hear her now, saying in her gentle Irish brogue, "You must never say 'It cannot be done', The only question is 'How shall it be done?'".

* That title, "Minding the Threshold", was a quote from an article by the late John O'Donohue, published in "The Furrow" in 1998. It was, I believe, introduced to CHRISM by Donald Eadie on that snowy reflective weekend a couple of years ago, also held at Crophorne. The old adage 'Better to travel hopefully than to arrive' proved true for me on that occasion: I travelled hopefully but failed to arrive. I have been deeply grateful to those kind people who copied the 'source material' to me. The thoughts and insights that were expressed in that and other writings by John O'Donohue have meant a lot to me ever since.

Now that I hear so little (and with this gift of deafness I misread or misunderstand so much that is said) I suppose a lot of my thinking is based on guesswork and is very probably tempered by what I want - or hope - to hear. That may at times be an embarrassment to me and to others - but I enjoy the freedom it offers. So maybe my 'reflections' here bear no relation to the discussions of others at the 'weekend' - but I am grateful for what I learned and maybe the thoughts that I took home with me will be of some value to others.

4. A reflection – Margaret Trivasse

E i g h t e e n months ago, someone sent me a copy of Ministers-at-Work. This alerted me to the existence of CHRISM, and I joined, in the hope that here was a body



which could help me think through the nature of my ministry. My designation is NSM but although I was always clear throughout selection and training that, even if hidden, my vocation was as much (if not more) to my workplace as to a parish. Six years on from ordination, I had not found a suitable forum for exploring what my ministry at work meant.

I had already booked a retreat for 2011 when the flier for the CHRISM reflective weekend arrived. But an e-mail cancelling my retreat due to a serious water burst providentially opened the way, and I am very thankful for that, since the reflective weekend was exactly what I needed. Many thoughts and impressions will stay with me.

What struck me most forcibly was how refreshingly unchurchy the gathering felt. It was such a relief to be among people thoughtfully wrestling with what it means to be a Christian in the wider world, and not bogged down in the swamp of church structures. Apparently, with around 30 participants, it was one of the best-attended CHRISM events. Everybody made very welcome those of us whose first time this was. The framework of worship was light and relevant, and the silence felt to me spacious and not oppressive. Similarly, the weekend did not feel too busy. Small group discussion was helpful and not overdone, and there was a blessed absence of plenaries!

Donald Eadie led our reflection in a very gentle and eirenic way, dropping stories and allusions into our imaginations and letting them ripple and resonate, like the pebbles he encouraged us to drop into water. I had known of Donald by reputation before I came, having a connection via two sets of friends, so it was a great joy actually to meet and talk with him. His three themes of transformation, providence and blessing were offered to us in a meditative rather than didactic way.

Concepts which his words evoked in me were openness, connection and the challenge of being on the edge. Openness for me was about being where God has called me, in the present, open to experience and non-traditional models. Openness to the encounter with God can also be uncomfortable and nourishment can be found beyond the place of safety. The more I reflected on providence, the more connections I perceived between different areas of my life. Donald did not give easy answers nor shy away from instances where situations are not transformed, and God's providence is concealed. Vulnerability is at the heart of transformation.

In talking with others, I was reassured to find that my passion for what I do (I work as a primary care counsellor in Bradford, specializing in asylum seekers and refugees) is as strong as ever, despite, or because of, the best endeavours of the NHS. My task, I feel as a result of the weekend, is to be more thoughtful-through about my ministry, and the place of a priest in that particular setting. The retreat confirmed



Donald Eadie (left) and Jim Cummins at the reflective weekend (Photos courtesy of Bill Dodge)

for me that my ministry is indeed in the workplace, undergirded by the parish, and not the other way round. I hope that it is the first of many I will attend.

And finally...

Hope is a strong plant

Hope is a strong plant, but a tender seed,
yet the soil it requires is fragile and unpromising.
Hope has nowhere to take root within certainty
For it grows within the soil of unknowing.
Hope seldom grows in the light of a clear day:
but it flourishes in deepest darkness.
Hope does not often take root upon arrival;
for it grows within the soil of the journey.
Hope seldom grows amongst the rich:
but it flourishes amongst the poor and excluded.
Hope does not often take root in the centre;
for it grows in the soil among the margins.
Hope seldom grows amongst the powerful;
but it flourishes in the lives of the vulnerable.

And so, Mary gave birth to hope in uncertainty,
darkness, journeying and exclusion.
The message of hope was heard
by shepherds, out on the edge.
And hope is found
in a vulnerable, helpless child.

And so we remember all those today;
who live with uncertainty,
who dwell in darkness,
whose journey is hard and long,
who live with poverty and exclusion.

Written by Peter Cole, a Methodist Minister, sent to Donald Eadie who sent it to Jim Cummins, who sent it to me (Mike Rayner). I have reprinted this without Peter Cole's permission. I hope he doesn't mind.

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*Our faith imposes on us a right and a duty to throw ourselves
into the things of the earth*

Teilhard de Chardin