

The key to the door
by Simon Mapp



'The key to the door' was
written in May 2020
by Simon Mapp.

As a true theologian and
restless seeker of truth, this
has been published in his
loving memory.

Cover photography by
Simon Mapp.

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Introduction

It was the Methodist Minister William Sangster, a great preacher, who said, there is no point in writing if the reader cannot understand what is being said. Sangster concluded that if one writes in a fashion that is difficult to understand there is only one reason; the writer does not *clearly* understand the subject.

There's a danger in writing a little book on these thinkers that I end up only regurgitating their work, poorly, and therefore you might be better to read their own work in its original format, not some put together jumble that this might be. By-the-way, I would encourage anyone reading this to read the authors own works too.

But this little book is not really about the authors, it is about *me*, and those who have influenced my own thinking. This is not an introduction to their work, though that might be a nice consequence. This book is looking at their work from *my* perspective, *my* interpretation and why they have influenced *me*.

That said, I'm not going to give a running commentary on their works. I've selected primary traits, *as I see it*, so I'm going to let their work speak for themselves and hopefully it will lead to a better understanding of Simon Mapp. Whatever the outcome I have had enormous fun doing this, and it is been a cathartic experience.

There are a couple of thinkers I would like to have included, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida but to do so would be to delve into deep philosophical ground and one would require a knowledge of specialised language and I am keen to keep in mind the guidance from William Sangster.

The thinkers I have chosen are:

- * Soren Kierkegaard
- * Ludwig Wittgenstein
- * Leslie Weatherhead
- * John Moriarty
- * Tom Wright

These thinkers have influenced me for different reasons, so do not look for a common thread, other

than the person I am.

I know that I'm a Christian who sometimes has agonising doubts, and I understand this in two ways. Firstly, my doubts come when I'm at my busiest in my ministry, supporting families, doing what I feel 'called' to do, by God and forgive me, I don't have good language for this but it feels like I'm under attack from something *darker* [see my chapter on Tom Wright for a fuller explanation of how we might understand this]. Secondly, sometimes, and here I rest in the writings of John Moriarty, when I'm distant from God, in the darkness, this is actually when I'm closest to God. Kierkegaard inspires me to move away from the organisation of religious institutions and find an asceticism, a lay monastic life, to discover what it means to be a Christian.

Wittgenstein delves into some technical language but this little book would not be possible without reference to him, not in relation to his philosophical work especially, but how he has influenced me as a Christian.

Leslie Weatherhead has been a constant companion throughout my life, his preaching, best defined as 'truth through personality', his message, and his pastoral ability. Weatherhead was a preacher and a writer with a gift for finding beautiful language to express the love of God for his people. I owe Weatherhead more than I could possibly say.

I am not an academic, and I will not pretend to be so but I did read theology at University and I do have an appreciation for the complexities of scriptural interpretation, systematic theology, and I enjoy the linguistic tease of many philosophers. Interestingly, and self-reflectively, I studied at a liberal University, Birmingham and was [and I hope this is not unfair to say] steered away from more 'evangelical' scholars, such as Tom Wright. Having now spent twelve years in ministry I am appreciating Professor Wright's scriptural studies and his many books.

This leads me on to a very brief biography, brief, because every biography is contingent.

A Methodist, then a radical theology student at

Birmingham, then a radical Methodist preacher, then having secured a place at Oxford University to continue my theology studies, rejected by the Church of England, so, I picked myself up, got a job as a high schools careers officer, and went off to Nottingham University for five years to study Community, Social Work, and Career Guidance. Then I was a Minister in an independent Church where I began a funeral ministry [which still continues today] then back to Oxford University [Dept of Continued Education] for one-year part-time study of Philosophy, finally back to the Methodist Church where I'm happy as a member, occasional preacher, and helper at Bible study gatherings, and endeavour to follow a path as a lay monastic.

So, from radical student, to now as I write, a more evangelical funeral Pastor, I see my journey has moved into a richer and deeper understanding of what it means to be a Christian. [I am still learning]

I must also offer a huge appreciation to the Monks at Mount St Bernard Abbey where I spent time in prayer and meditation, a place of constant support and

unconditional acceptance. Of all the places of prayer I have visited or taken services, Mount St Bernard Abbey is the place where I feel most at 'home'.

Finally, I am often worried about what I call myself, so I now rest with 'Community Pastor' [a shepherd] who helps people in their times of need.

Blessings

Simon



Christianity *In Relation* to Soren Kierkegaard [1813-1855]

Reflect out of Christianity to find Christianity

If one attends Church on a Sunday, listens to a rousing sermon, recites the creeds, sings wonderful hymns then returns home for a hearty Sunday lunch and nothing has changed, save the conviction they've done their bit, then what is the point?

This perhaps sums up Kierkegaard's theological position because he questioned the role of Christianity in the Western Church, more than he questioned the existence of God.

Tonalities of Christianity in a secular society can be found in Kierkegaard's '*The Present Age*':

Published in 1846 '*The Present Age*' came after a paper on the 'concept of irony' written in 1841 in which he defined irony as 'infinite negativity' of which existence is alien. What Kierkegaard defines as

‘actuality’, he sees all around in the present age has lost its validity, and thus becomes imperfect. For Kierkegaard what we do in our ‘present age’ is being lost because of a contagious negativity that permeates society from all angles, in relation to Christianity.

Actuality [the state of existing in reality] may be seen in two forms:

- * Historic: the ‘thus’ a certain time, a certain place

- * Metaphysic: when ideas rise about our existence

Therefore, there are two ways in which the negativity can be challenged. Metaphysics is one way, and certainly more reliable than the historic, for it is ‘actuality’ that is the opposite to the negativity that is the result of the tired objective truths that the churches offer on a Sunday and the creeds that are repeated by rote by the congregation.

How can one guard from a regression into irony? For Kierkegaard the answer is what he describes as

'reflection', when the Christian, or non-Christian attends a Church and the services begins, they start the process of reflecting on what is being said. This is the natural process one goes through before they 'join' any group or cause. They listen, they consider, they ask to join. However, for Kierkegaard the process of reflection is a withdrawal not a proceeding forward and the paradox of only through a withdrawal begins the '*becoming*' the '*to come*'. The thinking Christian will, for Kierkegaard, reflect not into Christianity but out of 'traditional Sunday Christianity' to become a more authentic, and, *inter-alia*, simple Christian.

Is this a leap of faith?

Kierkegaard writes:

"As humans we like to join together, and so even the gifted man sees himself as a fictional part of some quite trivial matter, and so fails to achieve the infinite freedom of religion".

Kierkegaard continues to suggest that the ironist is often proud to be out of step with Christianity whilst

the actuality continues, through the established order, as the Christian continues to recite the creeds untouched. But the process of reflecting out of something requires a sacrifice, as Kierkegaard always felt it should. But sacrifice is not the same as creating a pattern of Sunday worship, that often many consider, namely, the down drag of attending Church on a raining Sunday morning. Moreover, for Kierkegaard, this type of 'blind attendance' is a betrayal of what religious life should be about, and so misunderstands theological thinking.

In 1850 Kierkegaard wrote *Practice in Christianity* under a pseudonym *Anti-Climacus* where he writes of the paradox of the God-man, by which he means not the union of God and man but rather of God and the human being through Christianity...Christ.

Kierkegaard feels that what the God-man wants is not a relationship with the Church (the 19th Century Church although the same claim could be made today) but a relationship with the individual human-being and this is the great paradox.

The paradox being, if Christianity is based purely on external dogmas of the Church they can be easily dismissed through doubt but, not so, if an individual decides to imitate Christ. Surely, this is more representative of Christ's teachings.

“That the human-race is supposed to be in kinship with God is ancient paganism... but that the individual human being is God is Christianity, and this particular human being is the God-man.”

In the same essay Kierkegaard goes on to question the Trinity, on the grounds that to do so is to not have a developed conception of God, further claiming that Jesus warned against this ‘offence’.

Kierkegaard keeps returning to Christianity being ‘childlike’ and warning against this view. You may at this point be thinking about the passage in the Gospel of Matthew Chap 18.3 *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven”* (NIV) but this would be to misunderstand Kierkegaard’s position, for he is not criticising the Bible and its teachings,

but rather trying to safeguard it from what he considers childlike understandings.

If we sanitize the crucifixion of Jesus and teach our children that the picture of Jesus hanging from the Cross is artistic, then it will never become so horrific that the only response is to turn our backs, not in shame but in horrified awe.

If we teach the story of Jesus to children so they come to know it by rote, then for Kierkegaard the adult stands accused for who but the *“..inhuman brute, who, would not involuntarily drop his gaze and stand almost like a poor sinner the moment he is going to tell a child this for the first time.”*

In other words, what impression would we give to our children who see only the crucified picture of Jesus as beautiful art? No, Jesus must be depicted as the 'King of the Jews' suffering the most painful death penalty, with criminals by his side. And the adult response to the child must be that Jesus was the most loving person who ever lived.

This is the beginning of Christianity, when the child

understands that God would have done everything to prevent this agony from happening. Then the message is beginning and the message ends in an understanding that Jesus did not enter the world to be worshipped but rather came not to be served but to serve and asks only for *'imitators'*.

Considering these points by Kierkegaard, is it then possible to 'worship'?

If I ask you to look at a painting and observe the painting, what is it that I am doing? Am I inviting you into my own thoughts? Am I asking you to enter the thoughts of the painter? Or, am I asking you to make up your own opinion? For all three possibilities have theological problems, in relation to the 'sermon', which is mostly about 'observation'. "*..That the Christian truth cannot really be about observations*".

For Kierkegaard the Christian truth must be a two-way road. The Christian truth is looking at the preacher as much as the preacher is trying to pass over the said truth, therefore "*...It is a risk to preach*".

As my theology professor Marius Felderhoff asks in

his book *'Revisiting Christianity'* 2011 p32 *'If worship is an activity, whose activity is it really?'*

If Kierkegaard is right in suggesting that worship is a two-way road then worship is an activity for God as much as for the congregation on a Sunday morning. Therefore, the concept of mere observation becomes void of the possibility of revelation, where the Eternal becomes manifest.

Therefore, we often, frightened of what might be, turn worship into a wholly human activity of religious education. But, the pastor of long experience has learnt how to draw away from himself and moves from being the 'I' to becoming the 'cause'. Like an actor or poet, the preacher makes observations, in the words of Kierkegaard, but personally remove himself from the scene.

But why does the Sunday service in churches become more about creating a sense of community, social stability and/or a moral code for the coming week? This seems far removed from worship. If worship can be understood as a relationship,

standing in the presence of...and importantly open to ...the revelation of the Eternal Truth of human kind, not least because this is where worship becomes, not as it should be, but rather a litany of errors based more on prejudice and personal opinions of the preachers.

To further clarify the difference between being an Admirer and Imitator:

Kierkegaard draw on these words: “..From on High he will draw all to himself” words taken from the Gospel of John, Chapter 12:32, suggesting that if Christ is determined in relation only to loftiness then the followers become admirers only. It is in lowliness and in meekness that the follower becomes humbled enough to become an imitator, for this is to be true to the Gospel narrative, for Christ did not wish for admirers. In short:

“What then is the difference between an admirer and an imitator? An imitator ‘is’ or strives ‘to be’ what he admires, and an admirer keeps himself personally detached, consciously or unconsciously

does not discover that what is admired involves a claim upon him, to be or at least to strive to be what is admired.”

What does Kierkegaard say on prayer?

When prayer has real depth, then it is difficult to reach the ‘Amen’; it is only for the one who has nothing burdensome upon his heart that the Amen comes readily. However, it’s important to note that for Kierkegaard, prayer is about an outpouring of love. Prayer is outwards because of the inwardness of prayer. In other words, based on the Gospel of Luke Chapter 7 v 47: ‘*..But one who is forgiven little loves little.*’

The greatest act of prayer is that of the Communion table which becomes the greatest inward symbol of cleansing. Nothing is retained, unless retained by the individual. One may walk away from the table afresh, unburdened. If one leaves the Communion table with the feeling of imperfection, then we will be continually drawn to the table and to prayer.

Kierkegaard keeps coming back to the view that

prayer is bound up with his understanding that Christianity must be outwards in its practice, but to be so, there must first be an awareness of the inner acceptance. How can one speak of Christian love, as Kierkegaard writes in 1847:

“How could one speak properly about love if you were forgotten, you God of love, source of all love in heaven and on earth; you who spared nothing but in love gave everything; you who are love, so that one who loves is what he is only by being in you.”

Kierkegaard is often described as the first existentialist philosopher. What this means is that he proposed, as we can see above, that the individual stands alone in their Christianity and that Christianity must be practiced through positive action. The individual puts their shape on society and it should not be so that Christian society shapes the individual. Only this way does Christianity become truly authentic.

For Kierkegaard, the fact that the Christian must withdraw from social Christianity to be free raises a

problem of individuality and education simply because how does one withdraw from something without having an awareness and understanding of what it is from which they need to withdraw? Kierkegaard's response is to suggest that of 'existentialism' in other words, to first discover the self (though he never used the word, it was first coined in the 1940's).

“But the self, over which I despair is something finite like everything else finite, whereas the self I choose is the absolute self or myself according to its absolute validity.”

The only way to release the fly from the bottle is to free the finite self from societal Christianity and in doing so discover a richer fuller self, the ascetic, through the absolute. Only through complete freedom can one appropriate God for this is to be fully human. For Kierkegaard, one chooses oneself rather than knows oneself.

For what Kierkegaard wanted was not a general introduction into what is Christianity but a way of

practising Christianity. Do not, Kierkegaard would advise, be so concerned with the philosophical problems of Christian dogma but rather live as a Christian. Do not be satisfied that you know the truth but rather live by example, to the truth. The price one pays to live by way of the truth is to be exposed to absolute doubt (a position the philosopher Jacques Derrida would advocate) and in absolute doubt discover despair. Despair leads to ethical doubt about the world around us, and the only way to recover from the doubt is by faith, simply because it is faith that has brought one to despair.

There is an insecurity about the human condition in the thinking of Kierkegaard, but the insecurity has a consequence for theology, in the same way Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy does. Namely that the only way to become authentic is to take refuge in a faith that cannot be rationally justified, so the reader of Kierkegaard is left with a paradox.

Christianity is more than language precisely by being unconstrained by the limits of language. Thus, Kierkegaard places Christianity beyond the language

of faith and all the reader of his work can do, is appreciate and meditate in the presence of 'True' God, 'to come' as an Infinite. In other words, in front of God but not fall into the trap of explaining God because the moment one does, the trust in faith disappears.

By kenosis [self-emptying] does one becomes fulfilled.

Christianity *In Relation* to Richard Rorty – a footnote

Contingency, Irony and Solidarity by Richard Rorty make a valuable contribution to my aim for Rorty sketches out the image of the ‘liberal ironist’ as someone who is both radical and has doubts about their final vocabulary by being impressed by other vocabularies. Their own vocabulary is inadequate to answer, underwrite or doubt arguments based in this alternative vocabulary. “Ironist” because ‘*..their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed*’.

Rorty suggests ‘*the opposite of irony is common sense*’ for common sense is to take for granted a statement formulated in a ‘final vocabulary’ in which judgements are made, beliefs actioned. The Christian, far from being confined to a perimeter of belief, will embrace ironism, once the Christian ironist understands that a Being can be conceived which nothing greater can exist. Through a deeper understanding that what is intrinsic to nature, now,

assumes a vocabulary that extends outwards beyond temporary appearances. Their vocabulary is not inherited, for it has no point to anchor, primarily by being in the to-come, as an infinite.

There is no 'knowing', and as such, there is liberation. But it is also more than non-realism, for that accepts the notion that *'this is all there is'*. Christian ironism is more than Rorty's explanation of the metaphysics, whereas the ironist is happy to accept redescription of the metaphysics:

'..wants to start by getting straight about which of these people are poets, philosophers, and which are scientists'.

Christian ironism accepts there is no final vocabulary, even *ironically* such propositions as 'Truth is a product of the human mind' is framed within a vocabulary to indicate there is no final vocabulary.

No! The Christian ironist is not a relativist, but a liberal who is secure enough to rest in the Christian tradition whilst appreciating that it is more respectful *to face, be in front of, stand-alone in the presence of,*

God le-avenir, never arriving, safe from consumption
into vocabulary.



Christianity *In Relation* to Ludwig Wittgenstein [1889-1951]

God is in the Silence.

This chapter is going to be more personal. It's going to be about what *I've* learnt about being a Christian from Wittgenstein, and how his writings and life have supported *my* search for meaning, a meaning that is rooted in Christianity.

Whenever anyone reads, or hears the name Wittgenstein one is either filled with nervousness or despair and his name has become known with complicated theory. It's said that if one wishes to look intelligent during a dinner party then drop into conversation the names Wittgenstein or Schopenhauer.

[If anyone is interested in his biography then there

are plenty of books that will go into more detail than I possibly could]

This chapter is about me!

Wittgenstein struggled to secure his faith.

Wittgenstein was a man who wanted to find God and would do anything to achieve his goal. If this meant dying whilst posted on the front line during the first World War, then so be it. Wittgenstein was uncomfortable with the thoughts that the sciences and mathematics would solve all the problems of the world. Indeed, the first World War soon came to symbolise that science could not stop human tragedy, on a monumental scale.

Today's world often considers religion of no relevance to the human. We have science, we have technology and we have mathematics, these are all we require. Indeed this message is permeated through, as the churches remain mostly empty on a Sunday morning. And yet, as a Community Pastor I see people still asking all those 'big questions'

especially in times of trial or personal sadness. These questions will remain, and no amount of science or mathematics can help or answer why a family suffers a loss of *their* child or a disease comes upon *their* loved one.

What Wittgenstein has taught me, through his early work, is that silence can be a way of being in touch with God when words seem so inadequate. When language fails, silence is the only option, perhaps purposefully. Might silence be a truly blessed gift from God that we rarely use in worship or in our personal lives?

Noise and music are everywhere. It is as if we are scared of silence, or embarrassed by it and yet silence is God's gift to us. It is a way of being in the presence of God, without feeling the need to craft the perfect prayer. Psalm 46:10 *'Be still and know that I am God'* NRSV.

At the close of Wittgenstein's most famous work, with a complicated title *'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus'*

(TLP), his little book on logical philosophy, he concludes with the words:

“What we cannot speak of, we pass over in silence.”

This has been turned into a dinky formula or a quotation churned out at dinner parties, to look clever. However, it is not clever to do so, it is to abuse one of the most profound lines in philosophical writing, and I might further add, Christian writing.

Those last two words would [Christian writing] find much disagreement among scholars but that is okay. After all this is *my* understanding and *my* interpretation on Wittgenstein’s early work. The line that silence is the only answer takes us to the heart of Easter morning, to the heart of the Resurrection. The empty tomb is analogous with the silence at the end of Wittgenstein’s thesis. The questions have been answered and now there is an injunction to move forward into the mystery. In the Gospels that mystery is to try and make sense of the role of the resurrection of Jesus in the light of the history of

Israel, and in Wittgenstein's work there is the charge of experiencing the same mystery through prayer and meditation.

Wittgenstein certainly prayed a great deal during his early life but felt that the problems of life were not being answered in a satisfactory way, and the scriptures were being challenged through both the works of Charles Darwin and philosophers too. What Wittgenstein did, was not challenge this criticism through a defence of scripture, nor any traditional Christian apologetics. Rather, Wittgenstein challenged the criticisms by a detailed examination of the way that language is used.

[The chapters below get technical; you might wish to pass over them].

In short, and in simple language, Wittgenstein saw that language has a structure, but the structure is flawed in the way it relates to the physical world. He wrote that there must be a direct correlation between the sentences we write down and the objects in the

world. Only when this is so, can we say that something is truthful. When there is no correlation something is false, everything else is meaningless.

Of course, many considered his early work TLP, which was his only published work whilst alive, to be a great piece of mathematical philosophy. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself declared that he had, through this work, solved the problems of philosophy. But, and this is crucial, not because he had examined what can or cannot be said as truthful or as a falsehood but because all the most meaningful things in life are rendered meaningless through the inability of language to describe them, such as music, art, poetry, love, ethics and of course God, and the empty tomb of Easter morning.

Today, Wittgenstein's early work is often brushed aside in favour of his later writings but in my opinion, his early work offers some profound propositions that as a Christian can be imbued with meaning.

"We feel that even when all possible scientific

questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course, there are no questions left, and this itself is the answer”

This statement is something that I regularly think about in the role of supporting the bereaved. Whilst I do not say this, of course, it offers a sentiment that I can use. In short, the greatest questions in life cannot be answered with cheap language, and it is precisely because language fails that the enormity of the grief lies untouched. For love becomes more powerful than grief. This is obviously, because if love were not more powerful than grief then the idea of grief would not exist. And, love can never be cheapened through explanation.

Wittgenstein continues in his little book to say that the solution to the problems of life rests in the vanishing of the problem. He does not mean that the problems of life do not really exist – quite the opposite. The problems of life will never be fully understood and we, philosophers, theologians,

thinkers, scientists, teachers and everyone else often devalue the question by offering answers.

Of course, as I am a Christian, you might be thinking that I do have answers to the big questions and I do, for I have built my life and work around such answers, but what Wittgenstein has taught me is that these answers should not be easy. The Christian reply to the deep issues concerning the human life require the Christian to be silent and to listen as much as to talk and instruct.

Too many Christians spend time talking about the problem when it might be better to sit and try listening for the answer.

Wittgenstein would agree.

Does this mean religious belief is protected and above criticism by being beyond the parameters of the factual? A quote from TLP 6.53.

“The correct method in philosophy would really be

the following: to say nothing except what can be said i.e propositions of natural science -i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person, he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy, this method would be the only strictly correct one."

This was certainly the position adopted by the Logical Positivists and A J Ayer in his enthusiastically written book '*Language Truth and Logic*' published 1936. Though ironically, by being a 'philosophy' in and of itself, it fails its own tests and ultimately was to become meaningless [pointless rather] in the non-Wittgenstein-ian sense.

The TLP does not offer any pathway forward to justify metaphysical statements, only a logical approach to outline that which is not metaphysical.

It's easy to see why it has been considered a manifesto for Logical Positivism but this wrong. Whilst Wittgenstein does not say how the metaphysical can be discussed, it is by this very absence and reluctance to clarify precisely how it is discussed that the metaphysical is preserved.

However, what is meant by the term or word metaphysical has been different for different philosophers and it is important to outline what Wittgenstein meant by the 'term' metaphysical. I use 'term' rather than word for the following reasons:

Wittgenstein dismisses the a-priori [analytical statement] order of things because the subject of the human body does not belong to the world but a limit of the world [5.632]. What is metaphysical for Wittgenstein is the philosophical self, the world is *my* world' [5.641].

To suggest that experience rests outside the a-priori is to understand that the process of logic. is to know that something 'is'. But to know this is not an

experience for logic comes before the experience.
More plainly Wittgenstein is saying that logic comes before the 'how' not before the 'what' [*discussed in* 5.552ff]

* Logic - How does a machine work.

* Metaphysical – What is a machine.

Wittgenstein's explanation of metaphysical terms rather than words rest on the premise that language must remain stable, for it projects outwards to create a state of affairs. But the outward projection is reflected back and internalised, interpreted and recontextualised, and this occurs when the language does not fit the world directly by offering a meaningful proposition, when the 'How' becomes the 'What'.

I do know want to make a point about TLP as a work of literature and poetry. I quote Roland Barthes. '*The death of the Author*' 1967.

*"All writing is itself a special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices,
and that literature is precisely the invention of this*

*voice, to which we cannot
assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that
composite, that oblique
into which every subject escapes, the trap where all
identity is lost, beginning
with the very identity of the body that writes.”*

Most people that feel rebuffed from the Church look for a place of safety. Rejection comes in many forms and sometimes the rejection comes from a sense of wondering silently among friends because of a realisation that one is experiencing a gradual loss of traditional faith. But the next question that should be asked is as follows. Is this a loss of traditional faith or a misunderstanding of what traditional faith ever was?

Do I speak as a person who has doubts, a person who is rejecting the Pope or the Bishop, their thrones, and their liturgy, in favour of the professor of Biblical or theological studies?

In the TLP Wittgenstein created a framework of logic to safeguard the mystical and drawing on another inspiration of mine Richard Rorty and his work

'Contingency, Irony and Solidarity' where the rejection of the metaphysics is a rejection, solid foundations in favour of social truths but social truths that are contingent.

"A liberal society is one which is content to call "true" whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be. That is why a liberal society is badly served by an attempt to supply it with "philosophical foundations." For any attempt to supply such foundations presupposes a natural order of topics and arrangements which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies."

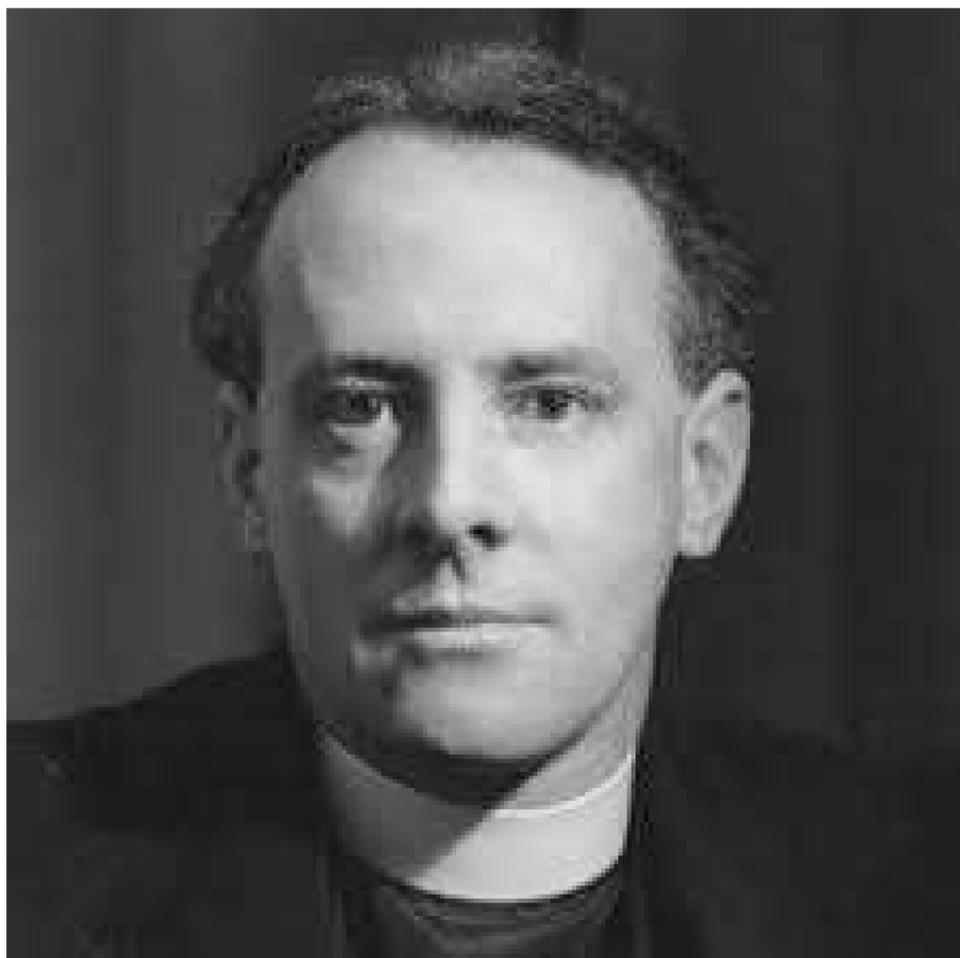
What I find interesting in the Rorty quote above is the distinction between old and new vocabularies. We see this in the biography of Wittgenstein, the early work driven against his later posthumously published 1953 '*Philosophical Investigations*'. (PI) These are widely seen as two competing philosophies, and yet I find this view myopic. PI is certainly a continuation of Wittgenstein's work on language, and internalisation but this would be to presume that the TLP is a work of only logic and I demur, for the TLP, I remain

convinced, is a reaction against Bertrand Russell's 'Principia' and a way of drawing the limits of language to safeguard what cannot be said.

The TLP is a 95-page book [depending on translation] of social and political liberation if read in the belief that there is no requirement that language has to be 'straight'. By creating a limit, one actually creates the process for freedom. Freedom can only be seen and understood in the light of a perimeter, a fence, a boundary of, in Wittgenstein's case, a logical structure of language.

“Man possesses the ability to construct languages capable of expressing every sense, without having any idea how each word has meaning or what its meaning is – just as people speak without knowing how the individual sounds are produced. Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it. It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is. Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of clothing it is impossible to infer the form of thought beneath it, because the outward form of clothing is not designed to reveal the

*form of the body, but for entirely different purposes.
The tacit conventions on which the understanding of
everyday languages depends are enormously
complicated. “ 4.022*



Christianity *in Relation* to Leslie Weatherhead [1893-1976]

The 'Will' of God

There is one person who, for me, stands out in this little book that is Leslie Weatherhead, a Methodist Minister.

'In the Church stood a clock, and it was a pendulum clock, and there were times during his sermons when he paused and you could hear the pendulum clock ticking – now if that isn't attention, I don't know what is'

This was taken from an archive recording titled '*The Power of the Preachers*'.

Weatherhead was interested in the psychology of his congregation. He loved his people, *really* loved, and cared about the people who attended his chapel, and his message was disarmingly simple, as he considered the message of Jesus. His Will is to love

one another – love really is all you need.

Of course, this might be to moralise the idea of love, indeed this is a position that N.T. Wright would take, and I would agree but, Weatherhead backed up his view that Christianity ought to be very simple, with a real depth.

Weatherhead was convinced that we have built up the wrong ideas about God and God's place, and interactions in the world, and he worked hard to break down these wrong ideas, seen most obviously in his book '*The Will of God*' published in 1944.

In this book Weatherhead concludes that the average Christian has confused three primary things.

1. The intentional will of God
2. The circumstantial will of God
3. The ultimate will of God

And Weatherhead expressed these views in what has been described as a 'therapeutic theology' through his sermons, two sermons a Sunday. [A position I would comfortably take to be my own as I take funeral services]. Weatherhead felt that the

Christian uses the term “the will of God” as a blind acceptance of whatever happens in life.

Weatherhead mentions this in one of his sermons when talking about the death of a young husband and dad, and the wife sitting in his study crying in the belief that God is punishing her for not saying her prayers.

“Do you think God is that kind of person. I wouldn’t worship Him for five minutes; but in the heart of every pain, there’s a message!”

“In the heart of every pain there is a message” the view that God directly creates or instructs disasters and personal tragedy is, Weatherhead suggests, to have the wrong idea about God.

God’s intention was evidenced through the teachings of Jesus we read about in the four Gospels, and His fulfilment of the promise made to Israel in the Old Testament. Only when the Christian understands these three differences do they have the anchor point for the Christian way of life.

When I visit a family to arrange a funeral, I’m often

asked the 'why' question or the 'God has called him/her' to 'heaven', and so be it, 'Thy will be done'. Indeed, much funeral poetry follows these same lines – God wanted him/her – it was their *time* to die, so thanks be to God.

However, I am left thinking to myself, what if him/her were saved from their illness or death. Would we equally thank God that this was not their *time*? Of course we would. So what exactly is God's will?

Weatherhead suggests the will of God, can be defeated by the human will, *for the present time* simply by having the freedom of our own will. The evil [or *profound wrongdoing*] that exists in the world can overcome God's intention. God does not demand loyalty nor demand His children follow Him. It is rather an invitation.

Weatherhead acknowledges another charge made against this position, and it is a position I have often spent time thinking about – that of offering comfort. 'Thy will be done' or 'it is what God intended' [however heart-breaking] offers psychological

comfort. But a misunderstanding is still a misunderstanding however much comfort it offers those in grief. And God does not *intend* anyone to suffer from a deadly disease or dreadful humanly created accident that kills a loved one.

Reading this you might be wondering if I have any answers as to why these things *do* happen, in the world? My answer is that, we live in a world, with all of its insecurity, contingency, and horror but it is not God's intention! What *is* God's intention is that the Christian is called to make a difference in the world, and offer a light into the New Creation. That is God's intention.

One of the consequences of misunderstanding the intention of God's will is the circumstantial result. This becomes very evident when 'things go wrong' [not God's intention] but the outcome can be the working of God through Christians. For example, when faced with bereavement often one of the consequences is that a family might become closer, distant relatives once again speaking. Alternatively, when one is diagnosed with an illness or faces death

an inner strength, or faith, in the light of this painful news, is found. When Christ died on the cross the pain He suffered from torn flesh was real, physically real. The laws of physics and the real world were circumstantial but most very real. Therefore, what is not the intention of God is still real and painful.

So, we can conclude that God's *intentional* will is not to hurt or cause pain, but God can use the *circumstances* of the freedom in the world to bring about His *ultimate* will. The ultimate will of God is His New Creation the coming down of heaven to earth, a remoulding, a rebuilding. And God's *ultimate will* is that the Christian begins this process *now*. As a Community Pastor, mostly presiding over funeral services, I live in the circumstantial but try to offer hope through breaking down the wrong ideas of intention, and explaining the joy, now, and to come, of the ultimate will of God.

“Life will only turn out one way and that is God way, all other ways lead to a dead end, of which you have to turn back and try another way, or they lead to some kind of personal disaster”

It is interesting that Weatherhead uses the word God and not Christian. The last book of size he wrote was called '*The Christian Agnostic*' and some would conclude it is a description he would have accepted for himself. However, if so, it was more to do with his impatience for what he felt was over complicated theology "My creed is a very short creed" [*The Power of the Preachers*] he would often say.

This was evident in much of his writings, and certainly in his preaching, for he would often just lean over the pulpit and talk to the congregation. He was a preacher who understood the pains of trying to hold on to a faith, and this shines through his writings. '*The Christian Agnostic*' is a book written to help those who also struggle with the complicated nature of faith, church language and practice. The simple message of Jesus is to 'follow me'. The book was written for those who are attracted to the spirit of the Church but not the dogmas or observances. One does not believe because of Church practices but because of what leaps from the mind which has *authority*. This last line could lead to the charge of 'anything goes' theology, but Weatherhead was clear,

if it is truly from God, it will be obviously from God.



Christianity *in Relation* to John Moriarty [1938-2007]

Seeking to Walk Beautifully on the Earth

Often, it's the briefest of moments that leads one to change the direction of their thought. For me it was around 10 years ago watching on the television the comedian Tommy Tiernan, who whilst walking around Ireland, interviewed John Moriarty where they, during a 10-minute edited talk, discussed everything from sex to society. I felt I had to learn a little more about this Irish poet and philosopher. It was not a name I'd heard of during my University years of studying theology and philosophy or my later reading, and as I later discovered he is not on any University reading lists for undergraduates.

I now understand why this is so. Firstly Moriarty's work is difficult to read, but not in a way that Wittgenstein is a difficult philosopher to read, but that his writing is not structured, purposefully so, for as

Moriarty himself has said, he did not write for his work ever to be widely read. His writings combine poetry, myths both Irish and Native American, stories from his childhood and family life, Greek legends, Hebrew, and Greek Biblical texts all mixed with contemporary thinkers to create his theological biography.

Firstly, may I say that I'm not going to cover any of his biography, though elements will inevitably protrude through, for there are already books that cover well John Moriarty's life and many books that can help the reader navigate his voluminous works. But secondly what there is not, is a book that is an analysis specifically on his theology. John Moriarty was, in my opinion, more than anything else, was a writer on theology, a man of faith, a man of Christian faith.

In 2007 John Moriarty died, it was the same year that Don Cupitt, philosopher of religion published a book titled '*Impossible Loves*' where Cupitt examines the way that the modern thinker can find God through the very nature of being unattainable, accepting a

non-realist God. I have always admired the works of Don Cupitt for he is trying to secure a place for Christianity in an increasingly secular world. Moriarty was trying to do the same though from a perspective that I found, and still do find, as intellectually satisfying whilst also more 'life and nature-affirming'. When one peels the layers of the works of Don Cupitt, one is left to accept that after death there is nothing. We live this life to its fullest, to shine and to give out joyfully, for after death we are extinguished, no more, the end and I find this quite depressing, for I've always believed that death is not the end.

The reader of this chapter will of course have their own views on life after death but what John Moriarty offered through his writing was a hopefulness, a way of accepting the Christian story for a modern day searcher, a searcher who wishes to also explore other faiths, a searcher who finds value though varied Eastern religious texts but does not want to give up their Christian faith, culture and tradition.

As I write, the greatest threat to religion, certainly in Europe is arguably apathy and the view that society

no longer requires religion. Church attendance is lower than it has ever been, rites of passage such as marriages and funerals are increasingly become more secular and where people identify with a religion, it is invariably more cultural than faith-based. Northern Ireland is still an example of such opinions, whereas in the Republic of Ireland the Catholic religion is no longer the dominating force it once was, indeed the Church of England is no longer a presence in each UK community.

If the Christian Scriptures offer an answer to such questions, then it is either not being explained adequately enough or the message is not reaching those who desperately need it, or there are simply no answers.

Moriarty wish was quite simple – namely to challenge, and ultimately free our perceptions from economic and religious reductionism and oppressive religious structures. Our European education has moved too far too fast and our souls have yet to catch up and as a result, human beings are suffering from what he describes as an *illness of the age*:

“The question is: are we ill with the great illness? And if not in our nature, are we, in our behaviour, aids virus to the earth? Are we doing to the earth what the aids virus does to the human body: are we breaking down its immune system? Is the earth HIV Positive? Is it HSS Positive? Homo sapiens, sapiens positive?”

By the use of the word ‘soul’ Moriarty is expressing a religious attitude, a religious language. What he is expressing is that which makes us all human is more than a European education. We are inextricably linked to the world around us, our soul is a part of the natural world and if humans are to become fully ecumenical then they need to be fully ecumenical with the animals and the planet that sustains us.

The European perception has become mostly oppressive, measured by usefulness, practicability rather than attractiveness. If we look at a cow and see only meat and milk, look at a tree and see only timber, look at ourselves and see only man-power then we need a re-evaluation of what it means to be human in the world and our responsibility to it.

However, his writings have a deeply religious, one might even say, a mystical quality.

Theology is as a subject that covers a wide spectrum. Theology is represented through music and the arts, literature and poetry, but fundamentally it is about an attitude to our place in the world underpinned by a curiosity, a dissatisfaction with an 'this is all there is' attitude or answer.

Theology is a discursive dialogue, but this should not be seen negatively, for theology is about experience. It is subjective. Theology is an in-the-moment activity that can move away from the subjective-objective position to 'tone', the way something is presented is equally as important as what is being discussed.

As a young man Moriarty wrote stunning poetry, and as with all poetry it is how it is read that creates the meaning more than what is written on the page. For expression to be understood is to be invited into someone else's world and experience their 'otherness' but on their terms, theology is active.

And so it is with Moriarty, theology is to move away from the tight-rope of liturgy, to move away from the wired perimeter of individual religious texts and to be in conflict with our ancient writers, but respectfully so, in order to rediscover the writer's intention afresh, for another first time.

It was Sir Thomas Brown that Moriarty, in agreement, quotes:

"There is surely a piece of Divinity in us, something that was before the elements, and that owes no homage unto the sun."

Moriarty goes on to quote William James.

"I confess that I do not see why the very existence of the invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity. For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean if they mean anything short of this. If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the

universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight – as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all, to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears.”

Moriarty writes to be open to the Divine, but his unique understanding of the Divine. As a Christian one reads Moriarty's Christianity as traditional in its use of source material but radical and unorthodox in its interpretations. Moriarty is arguing that even the Bible itself has fallen away from Christianity, and the individual must now make a journey, or certainly see their life and faith as a [new] journey located in the natural history of the individual rather than in the cultural history of Europe and the world.

It has been ten years since I first discovered John Moriarty, his talks, his poetry and his theology and he's been a source of comfort since, not because he provides easy answers, quite the opposite, which is probably why I find his work so compelling. But, what

he does do is offer a pathway for self-discovery, to Christianity in a way that has never been explored before and his theology has not been written about for the student, pastor or enquirer. I hope this book help you in your own search for the Divine.

'Faust' by John Moriarty

Look again at your feet Faust!

Your house smells like a stable.

The seagreen horse

And the high half hoof of the stars

You saw must be conjured,

Tonight, from your table.

But the demons we dream of

No longer desire us,

*And the stakes we embraced
At our birth burn out.
In the books she is Venus,
In the flesh she's the virus
That holds every cell
Like a bit in its mouth.

And neighing for the beast
You must migrate through,
You dream in the shade
Of the carnal tree:
Aquarius walks in the desert
Towards you;
And archangels
Grow wild at the edge of the sea.*

John Moriarty's efforts to heal the Western world run parallel to his wish to heal himself. In *Nostos*, his part autobiography he diagnoses himself suffering from the sickness of the age.

In this poem I'm drawing on Moriarty's searching and pain to discover the answers that led him to try a new wild baptism outside of the Christian tradition but, in attempting to find a new way of being ecumenical, ecumenical to the world about us:

Give me land, lots of land

Don't fence me in.

If I had a deepest need in

Relation to people in society it was

That – don't fence me in.

Here Moriarty is reacting against the oppressive nature of Christianity and its straight jacket form of liturgy that does not allow for any progressive

thinking. But, the need for a progressive Christianity is not to undermine nor is it to be controversial and turn people away from the Church. It's a way of emancipation, and way of seeing the Christian story mythological and still taking place today in us biologically.

On his return from Canada teaching, Moriarty wanted to find his bush soul, find his place back in Ireland. This was more than a homesickness it was a frustration that the Euclidean education was what was wrong with the world and the reason that Christianity was no longer being taken seriously, certainly not as a theology, only now as a tradition and cultural Christianity which was void of any depth of real meaning.

When writing about John Moriarty and theology, one is entering a world of myth, Celtic traditions, native American stories, Hindu and Buddhist writings and Christianity but Christianity understood by its stories recontextualised. These stories and myths, from varying traditions are woven together into a tapestry of new understandings of how Christianity can be

approached.

Does this mean his writings are relativistic? Are his writings given equal weight to Celtic myth as say the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures? The answer is both yes and no for what Moriarty offers is a way of understanding the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures through the new eyes, in the light of, other traditions and their stories.

Moriarty was a Christian, of this there is no doubt. But for him to accept the Biblical narrative and how it affects both the world around us and the individuals response to faith, he offers a unique and highly original perspective on what it means to believe in Christianity and its role as a religion in the world which is currently facing an environmental crisis created by a population that has lost its understanding and forgotten its place in the natural world.

But Moriarty was a troubled man too. He was a man who struggled with the traditional forms of what it means to be a Christian, and felt that only when the

individual can begin to explore their own nature in the natural world can one then start the process of becoming a person of faith once again.

For John, modern day Christianity offers easy answers to complex and disturbing questions. This incidentally is not a reflection on Christianity itself but rather our, or more importantly the Churches, response to its Scriptures and place and role in society and the world.

If one was to take Holy Communion, the central feature of the modern Mass (and we may include the non-conformist Churches also) there is a set liturgy that asks a profound question to which there is a collective response concerning, penitence, sin, forgiveness, evangelism, acceptance, before one enters into the act of receiving the answer by way of a wafer or piece of bread.

This, for John, demands a deep spiritual reverence that cannot be easily if at all understood. However, Moriarty is keen not to patronise the individual who finds they require such a faith to underpin their life –

and here is the irony – Moriarty through his recontextualising of this ritual is opening it up to deeper more profound understanding where the individual can begin to see the Mass as their whole life not only one part.

By drawing upon other faiths Moriarty is attempting to create a dialogue a conversation that can enrich the Christian stories and an understanding of what it means to accept a Divine context to all life. The critic may respond by suggesting that Christianity has all of the answers and therefore does not require a new understanding. But Moriarty is trying to say that it is the reader's response and perspicacity that requires expounding not the text themselves, after all Christianity is an echo of what is learnt and read and it is through myths, stories, and other ancient texts that can help in this pursuit.

Concerning Moriarty's own faith, it was certainly Christian and not pantheistic nor non-realist, nor even unitarian, and this is certainly elucidated when one begins to explore his explanation of the *Triduum Sacrum*.

It was a new Baptism that John felt he required on his return from the academic life, to be baptised out of the European education and baptised into to nature. Walking by a waterfall his bathed his head but never completed this ritual – clinging on to Christianity, not giving up his faith but rather feeling that it required a fresh interpretation.

Moriarty writes that Francis Bacon distinguishes between two movements, local and essential and whilst Moriarty had moved back from Canada to Ireland to rediscover himself or rather not lose himself, it was movement *essential* that he required – a move from one state of being to another. His *location* was merely a secondary support.

European education and European society has moved too fast. Science and technology are moving at a pace that our biological state cannot keep up. There is something that remains primitive within us all, what the philosopher Schopenhauer would name the 'Will', the driving force of human nature – instinctive and visceral.

Human beings have walked on the moon but so far failed to learn how to walk beautifully on the upon earth.

To rediscover humanity's soul, Moriarty is asking us to learn how to walk beautifully on the earth so to realign ourselves with nature.

"If all we give is mathematics, then mathematics is all we get back."

If humans want to walk beautifully on the earth, then humans are going to have to learn how not to be afraid [but remain respectful] of the natural world by hiding behind intellectual barriers. Do the books we read protect us from the world 'out-there'? Do the academic books offer a way of seeing the world without experiencing the world? Moriarty is not criticising the sciences, but rather suggesting that we often only brush the surface of science to hide away from the non-linear, contingent, randomness and free-spirited natural world.

There is something within us that is more than our shared humanity. There is an inwardly transcending

divine dissatisfaction that requires addressing. The current religious teachings in Churches and Schools offer neat answers to neat questions, presenting antiseptic pictures of the paths to salvation. *Stations of the Cross* in churches, even the crucifixion for the most part and the stable all provide a cosy image of Christmas and Easter which is celebrated with comforting worn-out hymns or chocolate eggs.

There is human intention in these rituals, but, Moriarty asks, does Christmas and Easter affect the world outside of a European culture whose history is largely dictated by the arts and romanticism? Is there a way of approaching the Christian story that the sceptic will be able to accept? Can our image of the Divine be an image that is subject to the psychological doubts many hold, and can our image of the Divine be one that is respectful to our ancient myths, traditions and stories that bring the natural world and God together again? One where Genesis is seen as important as the Gospel of John, which is viewed through the eyes of the other holy scriptures, sages, medicine men and women and faith communities?

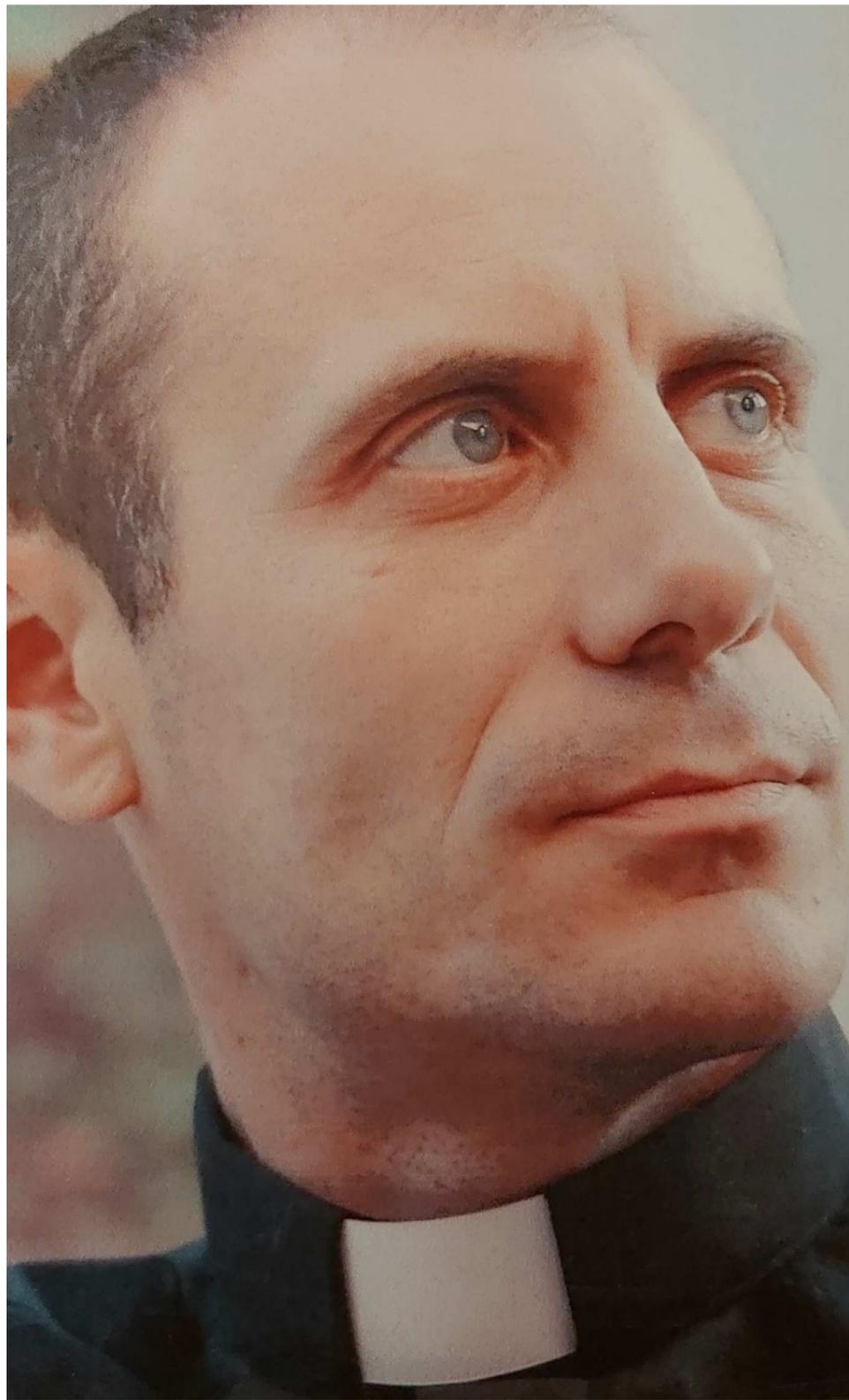
When we listen to music we shouldn't worry about the composer, though that can be interesting. We shouldn't worry about the length of the composition nor about the complexity of the score. We listen to feel inspired, invoke memories, to take us to a place of sanctuary. And for John Moriarty the way we approach our religious texts and stories should play the same role. It is about a personal encounter with the Divine a transformation of consciousness. Moriarty is able to rely on Christian liturgies with an expanded pluralistic language to discover what it means to believe in God when the invisible brackets are dismantled, brackets that serve only to create an expression of loyalty to a particular set of values and beliefs.

A problem is not necessarily a negative structure or framework that surrounds an answer. The way we conceptualise the world needs to be better understood to then understand why John Moriarty felt that he required to disentangle himself from a Euclidean education. Why on Good Friday European education moved from metaphysics to metanoesis [the philosophy of understanding the limits of

reason].

Define and defend any religious concept depends upon 'opposition'. A statement is often considered as either true or false, high or low, left or right, positive or negative and these statements derive their meaning from being in opposition. This is a mathematical or logical process of justifying, for the most part, one's religious views. Something else is wrong so my view must be right or alternatively my view is right ergo other views must be wrong. But for Moriarty this view was myopic, for he saw that atheism and theism are rather confused distinctions. If one sits next to a fireside and their legs get warm, is the heat in their leg or is the heat in the fire? In other words, many Christians may 'look like' atheists but remain ontological Christians by exposing their beliefs to absolute doubt and to expose oneself to absolute doubt is to experience the darkness.

The problem Christians must confront, in order to become authentic is that of absolute doubt.





Christianity *In Relation* to N.T.Wright [1948 -]

Heaven and Earth Come Together

To be a Christian is a challenge. It is a calling, to make a difference. It is to live *in* faith and to therefore to agonise over decisions in life. If being a Christian is easy, it is not being a Christian. Leslie Weatherhead famously said, leave the outdoor on the latch and Christ will come in an undo the inner door Himself. I agree. But once one sits down and faces the bright abyss of the 'to come' that confronts them, then being a Christian is not the easy option.

There is nothing cosy, nothing cute, nothing comfortable and nothing cheap about confronting the cost of discipleship. It is easy to buy membership, but the fees are life taking, so to speak.

Whenever I preside over a funeral service I am confronted with often cheap poetry and readings

about angels, clouds, or worse of all, slipping into the next room. The Henry Scott Holland 'poem', is not a poem, but lifted, out of context, from a sermon and the piece lifted is used as a caricature of what Christians believe. It is also to misunderstand what the Christian Scriptures are challenging us to confront. Namely that Jesus is offering a new understanding of heaven coming to earth and as followers of 'His way' we Christians begin the process of an heaven 'to come' earth reality, now.

The resurrection to Eternal life happens not at death, but after a period, unknown to Christians, when the New Creation begins. At death there is a period of conscious knowing, rest and peace. This might sound rather evangelical, but I find it rather 'earthy', even brutally realistic, and more honest than a celestial heaven, set apart from the humanity that confront us on earth. The Christian task is to act, now! 'To Come' is not to place God, shape God, or even 'know' God, but to work hard to bring about the 'kingdom' that is the challenge of Jesus.

'Heaven' is 'God's dimension of present reality'. Is

Jesus God?

Jesus shows us what God is like. But we should find the Trinity difficult. When we see the agony in the garden of Gethsemane this hardly looks like a Jesus at peace with the 'to come'. Jesus is praying in a new way. This is not a docetic [lacking full humanity] Jesus. But, here is **the key to the door of faith**, namely, that the enquirer should not make the mistake of thinking they know God and then fit Jesus into their image of God. We are rather invited to begin with the New Testament, what Jesus said and how Jesus positioned Himself, and then reconfigure the meaning of God. Jesus and Spirit was bringing together what was the Torah and Temple in Israelite culture.

God has shown Himself, and explained Himself, through Jesus. If we accept the Gospel accounts then we are told that at one point in history, in time and space, God came to make all things new Revelation Ch 21 v 5 & Ephesians Ch 2 v 15. Jesus did this by asking through His many parables, who do you think you are and why are you doing that?

And, if one accepts this account that Jesus makes all things new, then we should consistently be asking this very question and breaking open a world view and opposing the current world view. As Christians, we are called to reflect, back into the world, the image of God, learnt through the teachings of Jesus. Christians are 'New Creation' people – a new way to express oneself, to be human, through prayer, the spirit, and through faith, and practices in a new way.

On suffering and pain:

'To come' the 'New Creation' does not mean that the problems of suffering should be neglected because everything will turn out alright in the end. If one believes this, then they are clearly not taking the suffering seriously. One is not listening to the cries of those who are in pain and are suffering. Healing and forgiveness will come through the works of the Church. The Christian understanding, or acceptance of the suffering servant is integral to how the Christian can approach those who suffer.

God suffers. The cross is the key to pastoral

Christianity. Jesus, in His human nature suffers, God suffers in and through the Divine nature of Jesus. God has, through Jesus, taken responsibility for suffering and to reconcile and transform it by entering the heart of our human suffering; and the reconciliation and transformation come through the resurrection, each day God shares with us.

On evil:

What is Evil? Does it exist? The Bible says nothing of where evil comes from only that the world has become disjointed and people have turned away from what makes them fully human. The Bible is a narrative that leads the people back to their true humanity expressed through the life of Jesus, where all traditions, and all faiths, are fulfilled through His promise. But I have still not fully answered the question 'Does evil exist'? I am not going to offer a linguistic tease or loop, about the nature of existence, that would be a cheap trick concerning a dangerous subject.

N.T.Wright offers this explanation, and it is one I can

accept [not a direct quotation]: *sometimes, in life, what one does seems bigger than one individual or group.*

‘Something’ wraps up a group and rolls them into profound wrongdoing. Call this evil, it is more than the sum-total of human folly, more than an individual making a wrong or foolish decision. It is a *taking over*.

The Western culture has painted a picture of God to the right, evil to the left – a polar opposition. The Bible does not do this. If we create this type of picture we are back to poetic images from art and literature. This is dangerous because it is being simplistic, and as a result people will dismiss the very idea of evil *simply* as a word we can so easily use, and thus so easily dismiss. As Wright explains in an interview, *to make evil a non-human force is a tragic mistake with potentially devastating consequences.*

On the Christian answer to evil:

God in Jesus addresses this by offering a way of life that presents an opportunity to be fully human. The Christian life is safeguarded and protected, and even a fight against the disruption of the good order of the world. Christians do not like the term 'fight against' as it seems incongruous to the gentle pre-Raphaelite image of the gentle Jesus. Jesus was of course gentle, but He was a radical revolutionary too, who stood against injustice and challenged the *profound wrongdoing* that was around Him. This ultimately led to the Cross where upon [a reading of Romans chapters Six to Eight] one can clearly see that Jesus has taken the *profound wrongdoing* of the world upon Him and restoration has taken part through the crucifixion. But what does this actually mean and how does it affect life modern life?

Let us look briefly at St Paul's Letter to the Romans chapter six through to chapter eight to understand more fully Jesus' Mission and the Christian call to live a new life.

Chapter Six:

'What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who dies to sin go on living in it. Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life'? Rm Ch6 v 1-4 NRSV

In this short passage we have the building blocks of the Christian faith, Covenant, Exile, Restoration, and New Creation, St Paul is bringing together, joining, the Old Testament with the new life offered by Christ.

When Paul talks of the baptism, Professor Wright suggests that Paul is drawing a line to the Exodus narrative of the Red Sea [the Israelites cross to the promised land of Canaan]. For modern Christians through baptism one moves into a new life, a new humanity. *'Into Christ Jesus'* Paul is pulling heaven down to earth and showing a new way of

understanding the world, and our place within it. Through baptism the person is not, in the words of Professor Wright, '*located in sin*' but neither is baptism just a 'get out of jail for free card'. Baptism does not tell us we're now fine, don't worry, it is a call to act now...for the resurrection of Jesus demands action, both morally and spiritually through prayer and meditation.

Chapter Seven:

'Do you not know brothers and sisters – for I am speaking to those who know the law – that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime? Thus a married women is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if the husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning her husband'. Rm Ch7 v1-2 NRSV

This chapter at first glance seems too old fashioned to have any meaning for the modern Christian, but of course, what St Paul is trying to do is use an example of how to law can, under certain circumstances be renewed. Paul is saying that the

old laws that has bound the God's people to sin, creating situations where *profound wrongdoing*, let us call it evil, can continue to take place need no longer bind us. We have been 'set free' from the law. The primary emphasis in chapter seven is that of the old law and covenant [of which the Jewish audience in Rome would have known] has been renewed there is the new covenant.

Chapter Eight:

'There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit' Rm Ch 8 v 1-4 NRSV.

This is the 'anchor point' of St Paul's teachings. The first line in chapter eight is Paul talking of how God is

expressing His desire and His will to deal with the evil in the world, with the dehumanising behaviour of the world by offering Jesus to take on the old laws, the pains and sufferings and put them to death, finally, before the glory of the resurrection.

Theologians name this ‘atonement theology’. ‘Jesus dies for our sins’, a sentence that comes easily and it on bookmarks and cards and posters worldwide – but what does it actually mean – and how can it change modern life?

Firstly, it is important to see what mistakes are commonly made in the understanding of the Christian message: In the words of Professor Wright we have:

1. Platonised our eschatology
2. Moralised our anthropology
3. Paganised our soteriology

In other words, Professor Wright points out that Christian Ministers, Preachers, and worshipers have *created*

1. A “disembodied heaven” [an image longed for, independent of the physical world] where one

goes to as a reward – good people go to this ‘heaven’ bad people go ‘somewhere else’ [though quite where is anyone’s guess]

2. Moral behaviour is the key to the above reward; morals simply equal what it means to be a Christian.

3. And, numbers 1 and 2 equal salvation. But Professor Wright has spent his life arguing, persuasively, that this is to misunderstand the fundamentals of Christianity and most importantly the meaning of the Cross.

When we read Romans chapters six through to chapters eight St Paul is writing about the fulfilment of the hopes of the people of Israel being fulfilled through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ “according to the Bible”. That is important, for one cannot understand the teachings of Jesus, and the meaning of His death and resurrection, without understanding that he was offering the “forgiveness of sins” – not the hope of disappearing to some place absent from space and time for all eternity, rather, the forgiveness of sins is a teaching, a teaching that offers an opportunity to turn away from what prevents

us from being fully human [where we become subjects to *profound wrongdoing*].

Christianity is an invitation into the presence of God to, with His help, reflect His image into the community and world around us. The creation story in Genesis can be read as a building of a temple – for inside every Christian temple there is an image of Christ, in the creation narrative God’s image resides –and it is human.



To walk in a monastery

A way of life

I was around eleven or twelve years old and the family and I were on a short UK holiday, to go fishing. I seem to recall, we stopped en route for a break at a place that happened to be near to a river, with a waterfall. There was a monk praying, this had a dramatic effect upon me, I was fascinated, interested in what this spiritual man was praying about, and where he was from? Interestingly, more recently, whilst finding things difficult with funeral services, and work, and reflecting on what it is I do, I was walking the dog when I saw two Cistercian monks in a graveyard near where I live. I didn't recognise them from Mount St Bernard Abbey, but we said hello. I have never seen them since, nor would I expect to see them – nor do I offer this story as a 'mystery sign' but merely, as God signposting me to reflect upon my vocation, what I say in services for example, and how I conduct my life.

Some may say that prayers are not answered, but perhaps they are being answered, so much, all the time, all around us, that we can simply forget to notice them?

We all need to talk, we seek therapists, 'life coaches' and counsellors to 'sort out our problems' as we moved from one fast moving environment to another, and we rarely pause for thought. Perhaps, many do not pause, because in silence we find that our thoughts can become our greatest hurdle to finding peace or happiness. Society is saturated with people who have 'the answer', know 'the secret', and willing to share it, sometimes for a price. Finding stability and contentment in life seems to be the new 'religion'. Of course, many religions or ways of life also offer the keys to happiness and contentment, yoga, peace music, crystals, 'New Age' shops which all sell a range of smells, and stimulations designed to help one find sanctuary.

However, I have concluded that simplicity in life and prayer rests at the very heart to discovering God, which I accept as the route to contentment, and this

contentment can be found in and through the monastic way of life. I visit a local Cistercian Abbey weekly. The Cistercians are a Roman Catholic Order that has its roots in the Benedictine way of life. As a non-Roman Catholic, I find that denomination matters little at the Abbey. The monks welcome all, listen to all, and pray for all. Therefore, I walk around enjoying the peace, I sit quietly in Christian meditation, and pray within the Church or sometimes in the beautiful grounds.

What this does is sustain me for the week ahead, it recharges my faith, and allows me to confess to God where I have made mistakes – it is a ‘spiritual health-check’.

Whilst I cannot be in at the monastery all the time I have adopted, and adapted the teaching of the monastery in my way of life. I have the book written by Saint Benedict – his Rule, which is a handy guide for the rough and tumbles of life, but more, there is a beautiful rhythm to the Cistercian day which can be easily adapted to life – or should this be life can be easily adapted to God’s day?

The Cistercian way is that prayer is not just something that happens in Church, or at set times throughout the day – but that life is prayer and the way one lives is prayerful, speaks is prayerful, works and has fun is prayerful, and of course when one falls down – that is prayerful too.

Life is prayerful:

Like most Christians I find prayer sometimes difficult, I try not to let one's mind wonder off the point, I try and find a place of daily quiet but this is not always easily, and I try, often too hard to make my prayer as articulate as any Archbishop of Canterbury. But I fail!

What I have learnt from the Abbey is that rather than making my prayer life fit neatly, or somewhere into my life it is much healthier to allow my life to fit into a monastic model of prayer. Be in constant thoughts about God, thank God all the time, have a dialogue with God, in your head always. This need not be irreverent – for there is indeed a time to be in front of God, as you are, in penitence, and in Grace – but by allowing God into my life creates connections to the

world, to those who share the Christian faith, and by making my life prayerful allows connections to those who do *not* share the Christian faith, this is achieved by being a witness through humility, peacefulness, obedience and unconditional love.

On solitude and community:

What I get most of all from my visits to the Abbey is a clear understanding that I must create my peacefulness, time at home or walking through the woods. Peacefulness starts out as a physical activity but quickly becomes an activity of the mind, calming the storm of thoughts, allowing them to settle, and then with humility offering them to God, often unresolved.

If thoughts and prayers feel they are unresolved that does not matter, for often a prayer is answered by not being answered. This is certainly not a cheap way out of the challenge that prayers are not always answered – quite the opposite, for the need to be in front of God in prayer is the answer. The desire to kneel in the presence of God, whatever the issue,

allows God to saturate my thoughts by cleansing my thoughts. Simply I have offered all that I am to God and to His ultimate Will.

When in the community peacefulness comes through an understanding that I am refreshed and guarded through my prayers. My mind is stable, and therefore strong to cope with whatever comes my way – especially in my work as a Community Pastor. But, when surrounded by noise I can retreat into prayer deeply, by taking my mind to the Abbey where I walk with God. Because I have known peacefulness, I can take my mind to that place of peace when the waters around me become unsettled; sometimes when surrounded by noise, I can become most peaceful.

On Heaven and Earth coming together:

The most tender part of a funeral service is named Commendation, for me, is more important than the Eulogy [the speech of praise]. This is the time when heaven and earth come together and create the Divine space first experienced on Easter Sunday when Christ emerged from the tomb.

When I commended someone into the Care of Christ Jesus, I am speaking on behalf of the whole Christian Church. It is a declaration of faith, it is prayer and blessing. Similarly, when walks into any place of Christian worship they walk into Divine ground and a place of profound prayerfulness, as this is where heaven and earth come together notably through the Holy Communion [or Mass].

Of course, this Divine space can be created at home, it need not be somewhere as splendid as a cathedral, Abbey, or grand Church. What is important is a state of mind, to that end, I create a space at home where I can light a candle, read the Scriptures and retreat into prayerfulness.

This is, for me, a way of life, rather than an following a set of prescribed rules, I do however, try to keep the Divine office, a set of morning, midday and evening prayers; of which I find both a challenge as well as a sense of spiritual healing. Challenge because sometimes I find them dry, but also spiritually healing because I am aware, I am taking part in something far greater than what I individually

am. It creates a pattern to my day whilst keeping me disciplined [which I often need].

The Monastery is a place of spiritual quiet and calmness that the world cannot really give – and as one of the Cistercian monks said, what one gains from entering a monastery, even for a short visit, is a sense of freedom because this freedom comes from the giving up the worldly senses, and possessions, albeit for a short moment. This freedom can be reflected through the practice of the Divine office at home or at a place of retreat, for prayer is the most important thing anyone can do.

To walk in a monastery is a wonderful life-enhancing experience that allows and encourages deeper thinking of what it means to have the Christian faith. It is to share with others in prayer, and in chant, it is to be a part of the world, set aside from the world, where the presence of Christ dwells for us all and where the monks pray to, and with Christ, for us all. When I leave the monastery, I carry this presence with me to share with my community – that is both a gift and a charge. Conversion is not a one-off event,

conversation is daily, and when I drift, as often as I do, something brings me back, back to a life of devotion and prayer.



Spiritual Musings

The funeral Service

The greatest gift is to offer someone into the care of God, and at the moment of commendation, during a funeral service, I am often filled with a certainty that death is not the whole story, that this life is only a part of the picture of who we are, and what we might become. As a Community Pastor I have taken many services for young people, and for children, it is heart-breaking, and of course the “why” question is raised by friends and family.

When a young person comes into the world, they bring the possibility of hope, when their lives are suddenly taken, we around them might lose our hope. But, ‘we’ must try and hold on to the hope new life brings with every fibre of our being – because if we allow our hope to slip from us, through unbearable grief and loss, the loss becomes greater and more burdensome upon us when we also lose

our humanity and ultimately our trust in God. It is only through a deep and profound trust in God that offers a hope that the world cannot give.

Faith is the message of God is a challenge for me as I take funeral services. That challenge is to be true to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through the baptism into the Christian family. There is a lot of confusion about what happens at a funeral service, and many services comprise parts of the Christian message with contemporary 'new age' beliefs. So the service becomes a pick and mix of woolly 'feel good' poetry, and metaphors about 'live after death'. Sadly, in the past, I too have fallen into this trap with the view that I am offering the family comfort. However, I now realise I was just adding the saturated theological mess that is too often the funeral service.

I recall two occasions when I really felt this and explains this situation well. On the first occasion I did not answer at all well, and secondly, I felt I did.

Following what I had offered as a 'comprise service'

a service where I tried to be all things to all people, I was approached by a relative who asked me; *“I’ am a Christian, but I have been really worried, following the death of my uncle a couple of weeks ago until the time of commendation, where was he?”*

I offered a poor, and mixed answer that will not add to my point and following the service I felt I had not offered any comfort or certainty.

The second occasion was when I was approached by a lady who asked if she might speak with me, and she said: *“Thank you, for your words; my son died around twenty years ago – I’ve never been able to find any answer as to where is he now – would you explain to me again”* [I had discussed this during the service].

I had been reading a lot of the writings of N.T. Wright, and as best I could I explained that as we read in the New Testament; Philippians Chap 1 v23 St Paul saying *‘I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;’* NRSV. I went on to explain that her son, is in

conscious rest with Jesus, awaiting the resurrection, when heaven comes down to earth and she will see him again.

Following this conversation, I felt, God had put right my own confusions, God was telling me, this is how I can best offer comfort to those who have lost loved ones. The Christian faith offers a hope, hope not in a philosophy, nor in and through comforting poetry, but in and through real historical scriptures, that are alive.

Does this mean that funeral services have become 'easier' for me?

Not at all, I still must deal with all the emotions that bereavement stirs. I am still faced with anger and big questions when I visit a family. But my answers are grounded in Scripture and it is making a difference. I was emailed a few weeks ago from a man who told me that following a funeral service he attended, that I conducted [of a distant relative] he would like to become a Christian. There is no better privilege in God's world than turning someone towards Jesus.

I meet many leaders of many faiths, and none, at crematoriums. It has always saddened me that persons of no faith will take Christian services *“It is just reading words”* someone said to me only last week – are the families getting what they deserve?

Maybe it is not for me to say, for I am not protective of my vocation. If I never took another funeral service again, I know I have done my best to always offer a Christian service, but more latterly, discovered a deeper spiritual, and scriptural depth, that has changed me, my services, and will continue to do so!

A Sermon on Silence:

“When I speak, my tongue will interrupt silence. So, when you ask me to interrupt silence, you will never understand my message” Jacques Dupont a once academic turned Carthusian monk.

In our modern world we can be suspicious of the silent orders – the monastic orders. What good are they really doing – locking themselves away – from

the world. Wouldn't they make more of a difference reaching out to the poor and often neglected in society? Is it a denial of the realities of life?

Well, as it says in the Old Testament – Hosea Chap2 v 14

'Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.'

An important text for the monk. And their response is always that they are praying for the world, praying for us, interceding for us. Maybe we, on the outside, should ask, what would the world be like without their prayers?

Personally, I take great comfort from the fact that when I struggle to pray – there are people who have dedicated their life to prayer for me.

I take comfort from the fact that when I pray 'alone', I am not alone. I am accompanied by their prayers.

A few years ago there was a television programme called '*Finding Sanctuary*' the premise was simple.

Take men, from various walks of life, all life, there was even a man who worked in the sex trade, making films, students, builders, lawyers and place them in a monastery for one month and see if it changed them.

Silence can be dangerous and frightening. Silence can be when all of our 'demons', so to speak, come and start gnawing away at us. Our minds are not used to silence, and it takes courage to be alone in our thoughts.

The Carthusian day is rhythmic from 6am to 2.30am the next day. Or, for Cistercian's 03;15 rise to 20.00 retire.

(Carthusian is the order of St Bruno of Cologne founded in 1084 – on his refusal to become a Roman Catholic Bishop, he renounced all worldly good and decided upon a life of solitude and live a life of contemplation – funded by the selling of all his possessions.

The Cistercians are too Roman Catholic but follow the rule of St Benedict, founded around the same

time)

There is not much difference between them and we can learn much from them.

So, here is a three-point plan, for your everyday life, to finding your own sanctuary:

1. Whether you work full time or not, take time to prepare to the day, try **reading a Psalm** with your morning tea – before you turn on the radio.

It is interesting that, as I get older, I am appreciating the Psalms more and more because they struggle with every question we are facing today.

There's a very interesting video clip from a T.V programme that went viral and even made the news of the author Stephen Fry asking what he'd say if he was to meet God. Stephen Fry was quite brutal talking of why there is such a thing as childhood bone cancers. Asked on Newsnight to respond, Rowan Williams said: *"It's interesting that these are not new questions and that we are already beginning to see the authors of the Psalms battle these very*

questions.”

For example – if you ever think you’re alone in your anxiety or depression, or suffer with doubts in God, and think this is a modern problem (as the so called ‘new atheists’ often suggest) – read Psalm 88!

Then Psalm 40 for someone who is coming out of such despair but still needing, desperately needing God to hold on to – *“Do not, oh Lord withhold your mercy from me” “You are my help and my deliverer”*

And, so many beautiful words of praise – when we feel strong enough to offer praise.

Therefore, try reading a Psalm in the morning, with your morning tea, before you turn to your phone, iPad, TV, or radio – for it will take you less than a couple of minutes.

2. Put a pause in your day, or a comma, as I call it!

The dictionary tells me that a comma is a ‘*small break*’. When Jesus teaches us how to pray, He tells us that the amount of words does not matter *“Do not*

heap up empty phrases”

A thought, or prayer, in the day need only be but a moment. However, I do think a little devotion is required. I've heard it said a prayer can be offered whilst waiting in a queue at the supermarket but I do suggest that we find a little place of sanctuary and sit or stand more peacefully.

Maybe during your coffee break or lunch, sit in the park, the parked car, a quiet room, away from distraction for a few minutes, put down the phone, turn off the T.V, step away from the laptop or machine.

I once said to a priest I knew well, I never seem to have enough time. His reply was rightly compassionate but stern, nonsense – it is never about the right amount of time, it's about priorities!

I timed myself and it took me 15 seconds to read the Lord's Prayer, as it is in the Bible. Matthew Ch 6 v9ff

There are 86,400 seconds in a day – if half are sleep that still leave you 43,200 seconds – can we

prioritise 15 seconds on quality time in peace with God?

If the words of Jesus are to teach us how to pray, and be in the presence of God, then it is quality not quantity.

3. Close your day in contemplative silence, name it, meditation if you prefer.

Of course, one need not be 'religious' to respect of being in front of God because the phrase 'before God' says nothing about the human condition... denomination, believe, faith etc...for being 'before God' is not the same as talking 'about God'.

In Exodus 3 when Moses is before the burning bush, all he could do was take off his shoes in awe.

To be 'before God' maybe - to be rendered speechless - knowing that any words will be inadequate, our human language labours – so silence becomes the only answer.

Rowan Williams again:

*“The God I believe in is not an item inside the universe, not a being among others, but the energy the action, of love and intelligence that saturates everything that is the source of everything that sustains everything moment by moment that is always in the depth of every situation **capable of turning things around and making a difference** precisely because this God is not just part of the system but the context of it all”*

But, **capable of making a difference** at night-time, just sit, rest, quiet the mind and ponder on your day. Explore what’s happening in your life, good or not so good. This is a wrestling with God, and this is seen throughout the Scriptures.

And you may be stirred to use words, and ask for something, because God is engaging with us, **turning things around**, for He shows us what truly matters, when we read the Bible and so we pray.

Why are we doing this. Why are we giving time to, silence, time to God? C.S. Lewis famously said, “I

believe in Christianity like I believe the sun has risen – not because I see it – but by it I see everything else”.

We are, through silence, beginning to change the mental picture of both ourselves and the world around us.

St Paul writes in Ephesians Ch 4 v23ff “*..and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God – in true righteousness and holiness.*”

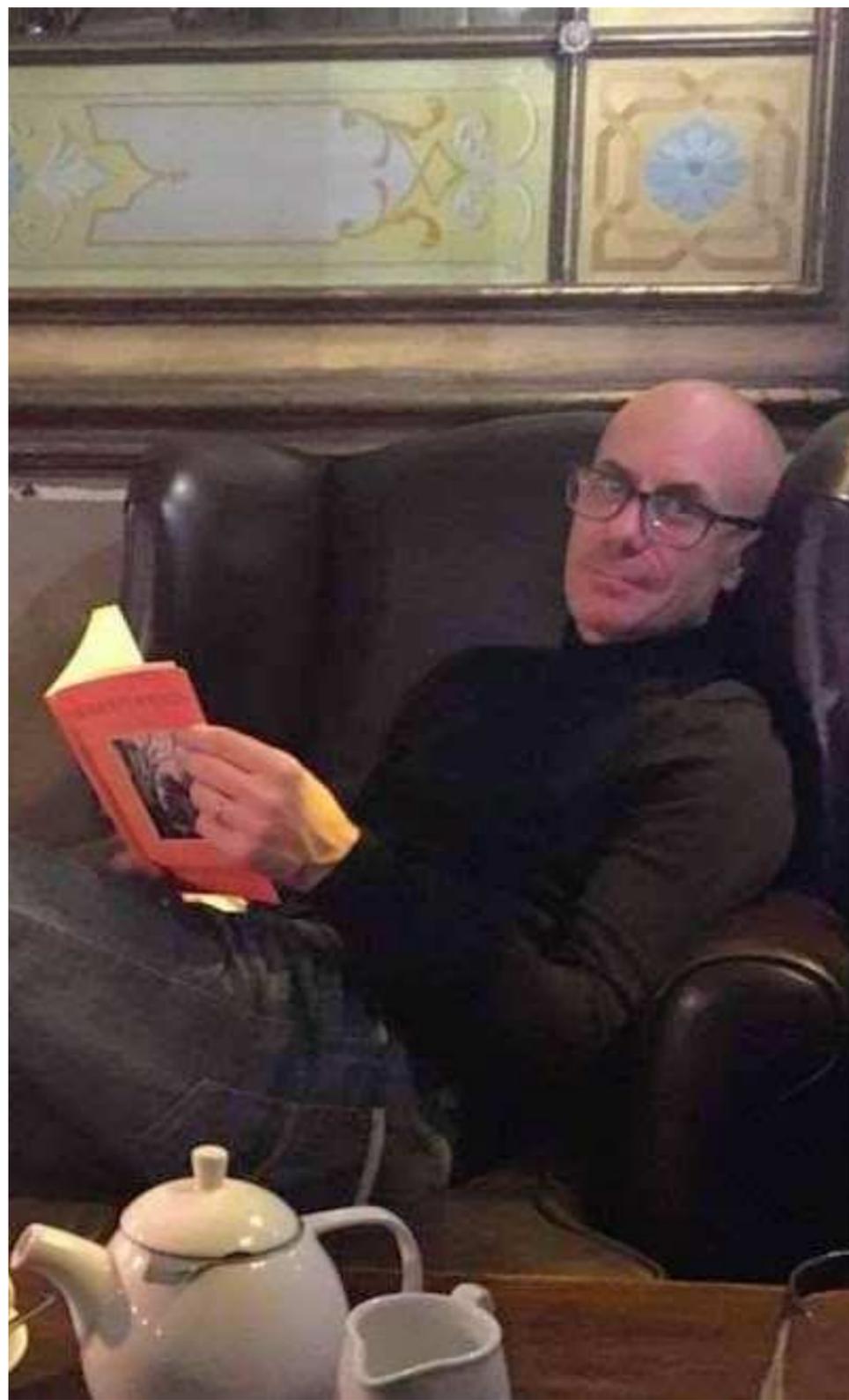
My favourite story is of Michelangelo walking through the builder’s yard and seeing an old piece of marble. What are you going to do with this...the builder responding – “Its old and stained, no use, and Michelangelo responding “*Take it to my studio, for there’s an Angel imprisoned within the stone and I can set it free”*

And when we sit in silence, and when we confront all our inadequacies and all of our faults and failings, as well as our endeavours, our joys and developments

– God sees that His image resides within us all and we can be set free from our failings, to weave all of our troubles in to a plan that can ultimately satisfy us.

But we must be open!

Amen.





Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, every book about faith in God should lead the reader to the Cross of Christ. If it does not do this, then it is something other than Christian. I might have failed, but each of these thinkers that have influenced me have not. Their writings, and teachings have the cross at their heart, they have just taken different paths to reach it.

I hope you have enjoyed this little look through a few of my primary influences. The only conclusion I can make is that it is when we begin to write our thoughts and thus expose ourselves, we do begin to see our own inadequacies. But, if there is one thread that does bind these thinkers it is that Christianity is broad, and requires, at first, nothing more than, in the words of Leslie Weatherhead, leaving the outer door on the latch, for God will undo the inner door Himself.

For **Kierkegaard** it is the simplicity of Christianity that leads to the Cross of Christ, whereas for **Wittgenstein** it is in the silence, when language can do no more work. Within **Weatherhead** it is

understanding more fully the ultimate Will of God over the intended Will of God. In the writings of **Moriarty** the Christian must begin to appreciate the beauty of the earth, as God's creation – which links seamlessly to **Wright's** teachings on the meaning of the Cross is the coming together of Heaven and Earth [Heaven coming down to Earth – and what it means to be a 'New Creation' Christian]

And, finally, I see all these things coming together in the silence and prayerfulness of **Mount St Bernard Abbey** and the rhythm of the monastic life – contemplative prayer, 'prayerfully being' for which I try, in my own small way, to offer, and be, to those with whom I Pastor.

Finally, these few pages are my gift to you, and I hope they offer you something on which to think, whilst also encouraging you on your own journey into a richer, deeper, and more Christ-centred faith.

May 2020.

“You will find this Friend challenges everything you do. He has an amazing way of arranging the whole life”

The Transforming Friendship by Leslie D.
Weatherhead.

