

Jesus and the Philosophers

Easter 2019

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5th May 2019, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Socrates and Jesus

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Rev Dr Simon Perry and Alastair Newman

Resurrection Reflections

28th April 2019

REFLECTION 1

A joke of a Messiah? A joke of a King?

A joke. It's insulting. Worse than Monty Python's "naughty boy". A joke.

A joke in life. He did everything wrong. He was born in a stable. He ate with prostitutes, sinners, tax-collectors. He spoke in riddles. He insulted and provoked his religious and political elders and betters. He fled when the crowds tried to make him King. He entered Jerusalem to loud Hosannas, but riding on a comical donkey. What sort of joke does that?

A joke in death. He could have avoided it all. He chose not to fight. He chose not to walk away. He wore a crown, but made of thorns. He died a criminal's death, but was hailed King of the Jews. He forgave his murderers even as they killed him. He died in shame, but made the cross his throne. What sort of joke does that?

A joke in resurrection. He appeared to the most unreliable of witnesses. He returned quietly to his followers with no hint of wanting revenge. He left no definitive proof. He looked so ordinary he could have been the gardener. He defeated death, but still the marks of the cross scarred his body. He was there one minute, gone the next. What sort of joke does that?

Some joke, but the joke's on us. With one hand he took up his own cross, and with the other he offered one to us. To live life like it actually means something. To die to our own manufactured hopes and dreams. To be given a new life: a life received and not achieved. To live, to die, to rise like he did. What sort of joke does that?

(Alastair Newman)

REFLECTION 2

Why was the resurrection a shock?

Jesus had warned his followers that he would be resurrected.

Why were they shocked when his words came true?

Ancient scriptures had spoken of resurrection.

Jesus had promised resurrection.

Lazarus had undergone resurrection.

But nobody expected it.

People expected death.

The companions of Jesus knew death.

Life expectancy was 18.

The population was young.

People died early.

And they did not die well.

People died.

Their loved ones saw it happen. They felt the consequences.

Death was a fact of life.

They knew death.

Yes, they believed in resurrection:

At some future date, the whole creation was to be remade.

In some future epoch, a great resurrection would see all truth prevail, all wrongs put right, all injustices resolved.

At the end of time, all would be resurrected – all would be well.

They believed in resurrection.

But they knew death.

They had seen death, the death of the one they had followed.

They had seen his agonising, lonely death.

Grotesque and unjust.

And they grieved, and mourned, and wept.

All the horrors of death made their dreaded intrusions.

All the horrors of this death engulfed all.

For those who had loved this Jesus, grief was all they had left.

And now, even that grief was taken from them.

They knew death.

And now even that knowledge was taken from them.

And with it, their knowledge of the universe collapsed.

As Jesus was restored to them, much was thereby lost.

Joy and pain, stability and order, much that is treasured or assumed.

All that is certain, and all that gives confidence. The ground beneath our every step. All that can be taken for granted.

Resurrection is a brutal thief.

Who, in their right mind, would believe it?

It is a thief in the night, shocking even those who expect it.

(Simon Perry)

REFLECTION 3

Resurrection Joy

When confronted with the risen Jesus, his followers were not happy.

They were shocked, they were disorientated, they were anxious, they were not happy.

It was the full force of a ferocious joy that had confronted them.

Joy can manifest itself as an involuntary smile, but the smile is not because you're happy.

Happiness can make you smile, but it is not joy. Happiness is the delusional quest of those destined to remain terminally unfulfilled. To make happiness a goal is to concede prematurely to death.

Joy is something else.

Resurrection joy had crashed into the disciples with the force of a tidal wave.

Joy is the flood of exultation,

It engulfs and overflows, it sweeps its victims off their feet and carries them elsewhere.

Joy cannot be conjured up nor can it be manufactured.

Joy comes utterly from beyond, even if it wells up only from deep within.

Resurrection joy is earthy,

It is rooted in action and can only result in further action.

This is no sentiment dislocated from the harsh realities of the world as it is.

Joy is no consolation without immersion in relationship with others.

It brings no solace if sought in isolation from others.

It offers no comfort to the rugged individualist.

Joy is an unwarranted, unexpected gift.

But Joy arises from struggle, from a cause, from the active quest for liberation.

Joy takes root in profound collective frustration, when confronting impossible odds,

when love has exceeded the limits of reason and despair,

when care for others has driven you beyond the brink of inevitable failure.

Joy is the hidden and terrible presence of something that whispers its promise to destroy finality.

Joy proves itself the final slayer of futility.

It does not prevent failure but transforms it.

It does not recoil from death.

Joy is the outrageous and violent thief, stealing from Hades his most treasured privilege:

the final word.

This day is holy to our LORD: do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.

(Nehemiah 8:10b)

(Simon Perry)

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Socrates and Jesus

5th May 2019

This term we are exploring the relation of Jesus of Nazareth and some of the Philosophers, mostly those of the ancient world. It was Professor Stephen Hawking who modestly declared that philosophy is dead. It is probably safer to say that, if you do philosophy well, you end up dead.

Of course, there are multiple ways of defining philosophy, and rather than tugging at that thread – the idea behind the theme this term, is simply that philosophy is part of the Jewish and Christian quest for holiness. The Shema – which was endorsed by Jesus – is a Jewish summary statement which encapsulates much of Hebrew scripture. It's use on the lips of Jesus, might by now, be familiar to you. Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one God – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind.'

From this perspective, Philosophy is the pursuit of loving God with the mind. It is the intellectual dimension of the ethical quest for holiness. And it means, thinking. Which, if you read the right body of modern literature, is precisely what religious people refuse to do. After all, surely – if you have given your life to Jesus, you don't need to think any more – you just have to listen to him. Thinking then becomes sinful, and philosophy looks almost idolatrous. You have handed Jesus control of your life... why waste your time in the godless pursuit of thinking? And if you think I'm exaggerating – here is the chorus of a Southern Baptist hymn the choir has yet to learn. It's entitled, 'Jesus, take the wheel'.

'Jesus, take the wheel. Take it from my hands. Cause I can't do this on my own. I'm letting go. So give me one more chance. And save me from this road I'm on. Jesus, take the wheel.'

I can't help thinking that it works well as a worship song, because if you put it into practice – then it will lead you very quickly into his presence. Refusing to think for yourself might indeed look like a short cut to a premature death. But if you do philosophy properly, it still takes you to a premature death – but at least you die in style.

It was the 16th Century French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, who famously declared that 'To philosophize is to learn how to die.' He was borrowing, as it happens, from the Roman philosopher, Cicero, who – in the first century before Christ – said that 'to philosophize is no other thing than for a man to prepare himself to death.' I didn't realise until reading through Plato's works a couple of years ago, that both thinkers were actually borrowing from Plato himself. Plato wrote his philosophy in the form of dialogues where he mischievously pens out a literary reincarnation of his former teacher, Socrates. And it is on the lips of this Socrates, that he declares 'In truth, those who practice philosophy correctly, practice dying.'

This was no throw-away line, but for Socrates (as we know him) it was a key feature of his philosophy. In debate with other thinkers, he proved himself readily capable of abandoning a long-cherished position if it turned out to be false. It sounds simple, and it sounds as though this is the kind of thing any rational person would do. But to abandon a political, religious or ideological belief, requires a little taste of death. The prevailing consensus has no room for this little taste of death. It is widely assumed today that for our false views can be modified, corrected in conversation with others or when we read a media report or hear a broadcast. Our entire democracy assumes, after all, that we are free-minded people, who make rational decisions based upon informed opinions. As Brexit has

shown, in the well-oiled machine of British democracy, all our decisions are rational and all our opinions are informed... or perhaps we should start singing, 'Jesus take the wheel'.

Changing your mind about anything important to you, is not simply a matter of receiving correct information. What if you woke up one morning and discovered that alcohol can send you to an early grave? Or that chocolate can make you fat? Or that bacon sandwiches and sunbathing can cause cancer? In order for us to abstain from these things, all we need is the correct information.... In order for us to change our mind about Brexit, all we need is correct information?

Much of the activity we call 'thinking' is simply an attempt to offer rational justification for decisions we have already made on non-rational grounds. Philosophy is something different. It suggests a love of wisdom, absent from the way our self-justifying thought-processes often work. To engage in philosophy might well mean to undergo something of a shift in the way we think, and believe, and act. And undergoing that shift is what the Scripture means by repentance. And undergoing that shift, is what philosophers mean when they talk about learning how to die.

Socrates, as it turns out, proved himself to be excellent at dying. Having upset the political and religious establishment of Athens by corrupting their youth and refusing to honour Athenian gods and institutions, he was condemned to death by drinking hemlock. There are various accounts of his last hours – but he was literally stoical: dignified and courageous as he met his end. He delivered a fine speech in which he calmly reflected upon death as a release, until the poison did its work.

The death of Jesus was nothing like this. Jesus did not approach his death calmly- but apparently sweating drops of blood, suggesting extreme levels of anxiety and stress. He knew what he was coming, was beaten beyond recognition, lashed within an inch of his life, mocked, stripped, and hung up naked for all the world to laugh at. There was nothing calm and stoical about the death of Jesus. There was desperation. No eloquent speech – just stuttered, brief declarations. There was no dignity at the cross.

To philosophise is to learn how to die. And Jesus did not die well

This, of course, is Easter term. Easter being the season when the Christian Church celebrates the resurrection. Where it proclaims victory over death. But the whole point of this is that there is no escape from death. No alternative route to death. No lazy or cowardly shortcuts – no assuming that Jesus died so you don't have to. No – this is the Jesus who says you cannot be his disciple unless you take up your cross every day. Unless you face humiliation and death, on a daily basis.

Like the Socrates of literature, the Jesus of the Gospels faces death full on. Like Socrates, this Jesus amassed a following that caused serious concern for the religious and political rulers of the day. Like Socrates, Jesus might well have been called a gadfly, - someone who poses novel, distressing questions at those with power. Whilst steam-rolling your way through the status quo is not an end in itself – it is sometimes where philosophy leads you (which might, after all, add legitimacy to that request – 'Jesus, take the wheel'. Especially if you're driving a tank!)

Unlike Socrates, Jesus' death was humiliating, not dignified. Unlike Socrates Jesus did not consider death a friend but an enemy. Unlike Socrates, Jesus did not consider death a sweet release as his soul floated free of his body. Far from it, the Jewish belief system was gritty, earthy, bodily. And the resurrection, is precisely the vindication of

Jesus's gritty, earthy, bodily claims. He did not leave his followers with a doctrine, or a lecture, or ethereal beliefs – but with a meal.

Christian philosophy is different from Socratic, because of what happens after death. Precisely what that is remains unclear. But where Socratic philosophy embraces death, Christian philosophy confronts death, and relativizes it. After death, there is a meal.

Socrates Intercession

Loving God, we thank you for loving us with every ounce of your being, and pray that we might learn to love you with every ounce of ours.

We thank you for our minds, for the ability to think, to research, to explore, to discover. We thank you for the way that so many of our academic institutions exist because of the desire to love you with our minds. We thank you for these institutions, for the colleges of this and other universities, and pray that they might continue to serve our world as places of education, learning, research and religion.

We pray that where minds have narrowed or closed, through over exposure to digital echo chambers, social media and fake news – you would lead us into all truth.

We pray that where minds have been damaged by austerity or poverty, by living for the next meal, by struggling to put the meal on the table, or by giving in to the laziness born of despair, we pray for justice as a basis for truth.

We pray that where minds have been submerged beneath sorrow, grief, or anxiety – where there appears to be no such thing as tomorrow, and where yesterday engulfs all – we pray for liberation and healing, that minds may be exposed to living truth.

We pray that where minds have been narrowed by certainty, where opinions have been blinkered by privilege or pride, that you reveal yourself as the God who speaks.

Speak through us we pray – teach us how to listen that we might one day have something to say. And teach us how to think with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, all our life – and by your grace may we grow in loving you with every ounce of our being.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Aristotle and the Good Samaritan

19th May 2019

Aristotle's Ethics was the first book I read in which I realised people in the ancient world were not stupid. Like many, I had assumed that if you were born 400 years before Christ, the most you could achieve intellectually and morally, was the kind adolescent knuckle-scraping grunt-monkey antics I have come to expect from my teenage boys. Aristotle's description of the human character, of the sheer complexity of the hopes and beliefs and behaviours and habits of his contemporaries – shone a light onto his own contemporaries that for me – brought them to life and made them feel like my contemporaries. Aristotle's Ethics is a work of sheer genius, and clearly we can only scratch the surface here – and only offer a single interpretation.

In the broadest of brush strokes, one way of distinguishing between morals and ethics, might be to say that Morals concern rules and regulations, whereas Ethics concerns character and personal virtue. Morals – from the Latin mores – are more concerned with codes of behaviour and conduct. Ethics – from the Greek ethos – are more concerned with the cultivation of human character and virtue. People often regard religions, for instance, as preoccupied with morality, with rules and codes and commandments – though it's true to say that in an era of identity politics and political correctness, we are witnessing a new generation more preoccupied with morality than we have experienced for decades.

It is very easy in my generation, for armchair moralists who have never lifted a finger to help anyone – to demonise good people who have struggled against injustice their entire lives. We demonise them if their media profile fails to adhere to the newly invented moral code to which we subscribe. Social and mainstream media are magnificent tools for the contemporary unwittingly self-righteous moralist. But moralism, of course, is nothing new. Ethics, can be perceived as something entirely different.

Aristotle is concerned with ethics, with the cultivation of character – because if you can cultivate good character, you don't need to follow an external body of moral codes. If you can develop virtues through cultivating new habits – then you will automatically become the good person whose behaviour manifests itself in ways that almost accidentally adhere with a strong moral code. Of course, the virtues treasured by Aristotle differ from those treasured by other philosophers, and probably from those treasured by us. But the electrifying core of Aristotle's thought, seems to be that practicing virtues, you become virtuous. By forming good habits, you become a good person. Inside-out rather than outside-in.

It is not simplistic to say that much of the tension faced by Jesus of Nazareth, was tension between morals and ethics. On the one hand, there was a prevailing Morality, in the form of religious and cultural codes. On the other, Jesus would talk about 'bearing fruit' – about work at the core of your being, that would manifest itself in good behaviour. You rarely find Jesus giving people rules to live by – in fact, Jesus doesn't ever preach at people. The nearest thing you can find to a sermon, has him encouraging his followers to break the prevailing moral code. Jesus was not big on morality.

Aristotle is helpful then – in the way that he unpacked how virtue can take root in a person's life, the influence that a person's background can have, and the importance of fostering good habits rather than only following rules.

The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates the point beautifully. By the standards of the day, Jesus should have issued a trigger warning. The phrase, 'a Priest, a Levite and an Israelite' rolled off the tongue of a first century Palestinian rather like we might say, 'Friends, Romans and ... Countrymen,' or 'the good, the bad and the ... ugly.' And Jesus throws a hand grenade into people's rhetorical expectations. Perhaps the best illustration is Goldilocks – who went into the house of the Daddy Bear, the Mummy Bear, and the Isis Operative. In the politically correct circles of the moral majority, it was profoundly offensive to speak about Samaritans, especially as objects of virtue. It's that kind of behaviour that gets you no-platformed. There were no safe spaces anywhere near Jesus when he was in full-flow.

The priest and the Levite, not to mention the lawyer at the heart of this controversy, represented morality – religious or social mores that ought to be applied. It is a parable about morals as opposed to ethics. It was a story told to a lawyer who had asked what good thing he must do, i.e., what procedure he must follow, what rules he must apply, in order to receive eternal life, what morality should he treasure? Jesus responds not by telling him which rules to follow, but by calling him to love his neighbour – because in loving his neighbour he is loving the God of Israel.

If you want to turn this into a moral tale, then you can list all the things that the Good Samaritan did – a list which incidentally was at odds with the prevailing moral code of the day, and at odds with the particular virtues treasured by Aristotle. Or you can reduce it to some shallow and inoffensive moral injunction – like 'hug a hoody.' But the Samaritan was hated more than that. He was more irredeemable than someone who voted differently from me in the referendum. It was assumed that he was automatically and beyond question, a bad person. So how did the Good Samaritan show that he was good?

It has nothing to do with consciously trying to do the right thing or refrain from doing the wrong thing. Instead, it was because he loved God and loved his neighbour. Because he was the kind of person who already loved God and already loved his neighbour. And when confronted with the tragedy that was in front of him there was no moral dilemma – he had no choice but to act in accordance with his pre-formed ethos. We heard an example of this at an inquest this week, the story of Kirsty Boden, a 28 year old nurse who, in the midst of a terror attack, saw a young man bleeding to death on London Bridge. She appeared to be incapable of ignoring the danger. Why? "I'm a nurse," she said, "I have to go and help." She had long since committed herself to helping. She had already cultivated the habit that led to virtuous, self-sacrificial action. And it cost her her life.

It is here that Jesus parts company with Aristotle. By whatever method Aristotle sought to cultivate virtue – an area of ongoing debate – none of the possibilities aligns with the route taken by Jesus. For Jesus it is in relation to other people that your character is made and remade. It is by loving the God of Israel that you begin to reflect his character. It is by loving your neighbour that you become loveable. There is no striving to become a better person, no battle to become virtuous, no moral dilemmas. For Jesus of Nazareth, there is no such thing as a good person anyway – it is an irrelevance. What drives his ethics is the relationship with the God of Israel.

When the lawyer asked for a moral code, all Jesus would say is – Love God and love your neighbour – if you want moral task to go and do, do that. Because that will change who you are. And it will change the way you relate to others. And it will change the way that you view Samaritans. And it will liberate you from your identity politics, and draw you out of your echo chamber. Then you might just be able to hear the voice of God.

The Good Samaritan Intercession

Lord, help us to love you in all that we do, that our characters might grow in Christlikeness.

We thank you that you are the God who blesses people with whom we disagree, who welcomes those we would exclude, who loves those we do not. And so we pray that our characters might come to reflect yours more faithfully.

When we are happy to judge, and dislike and hate others – simply on the basis of gossip, or ignorance, or laziness – forgive us. May we become people who offer practical and political love in a way that is not calculating.

When we have immunised ourselves to the distress of others, simply because our society has taught us to disguise our distress, and social conventions require that we conceal our weaknesses – give us discernment, and courage, and the capacity to listen well.

When we cross the metaphorical road to avoid doing the right thing, because we are afraid of the consequences, cause us to question our commitment to others and to you. Give us the courage to face up to the realities of our own cowardice.

Help us to see you as you really are, and to see others as they really are. Help us to hear you more clearly, that we might instinctively hear your voice in unexpected places. Help us to worship you more faithfully, that we might love more fully. To the glory of your name.

Rev Dr Simon Perry

Seneca and Jesus

26th May, 2019

(Psalm 112:6-9; Luke 15:1, 11-31; Hebrews 12:1-3)

As we continue our Grand Tour through the philosophers of Jesus' era, this evening we squint in the direction of the first century Roman Stoic, Seneca. He was born at the same time as Jesus, and was in Rome at the same time as Paul. Seneca was a brilliant and influential thinker and writer. He enjoyed a roller coaster career as an orator and playwright in Rome, and was eventually called upon to tutor the teenage emperor, Nero.

He is often considered as a proto-Christian Saint, because his writings on morality and virtue often align so closely with those promoted by Christianity. Christians, for instance, have been quick to point out the similarities of some of their pithy one-liners.

"It is a petty and sorry person who will bite back when he is bitten." (Seneca). "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Jesus)

"You look at the pimples of others when you yourselves are covered with a mass of sores." (Seneca) "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?" (Jesus).

"It's in keeping with Nature to show our friends affection and to celebrate their advancement, as if it were our very own." (Seneca). "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Jesus).

Still, when you consider these kinds of sayings in their historical and literary context, their supposed similarity vanishes in a puff of incense.

But Seneca's heroic status in Christian eyes is also helped by the fact that he was condemned to death by the nasty emperor Nero - although there is some debate as to whether he endured a terrible death, or deliberately made his enforced suicide unnecessarily theatrical and dramatic. If the 18th Century oil canvas of Seneca's death is historically accurate, then it's hard not to imagine a speech bubble next to his head, expressing a virtuous sense of 'gratitude, for the opportunity to serve the empire I love' – and all the analytical commentary such a remark might invite.

There is also some debate as to whether his wealth made him a massive hypocrite... a bigger ideological hypocrite than the right-wing evangelist, who last week sued his insurance company after his multi-million-dollar life-size replica of Noah's Ark suffered rain damage!

Seneca might be seen as an ideological hypocrite, because for all his wealth and privilege – he wrote at great length upon the virtue of giving. It is a magnificent work, and however you want to interpret it, it highlights – from a variety of perspectives – the norms of philanthropy and giving in the first century Roman world. At multiple levels, Seneca

makes a virtue of giving – one that in substance aligns with that of Scripture. Giving, even when giving to people who apparently could not give back, was always done with the expectation of a return. Generosity was always geared towards obtaining some form of reward. Benefactions were always granted in order to receive some form of payback. It may be payback in terms of reputation, in terms of honours and influence, in terms of obtaining credit for favours you expect other people to offer to you in return. Always, and without exception, at some level – is the expectation of reciprocity.

Christians often claim that giving should be done completely selflessly – with no expectation of a return. That you are to give without counting the cost. And while, since Martin Luther, Christians have assumed this default morality as a central Christian innovation, you cannot find it in Scripture. It simply isn't there. Yes, you give to people who are poor and unworthy, but actually – you are still expecting a reward, because 'the God who sees what is done in secret will reward you.' Within the cycles of reciprocity, all that is distinctive about Christian and indeed Jewish practices of giving – are that God himself is included in the cycles of exchange. There are, after all, such things as 'treasures in heaven'.

The notion that there can be such thing as a pure gift, pure acts of selflessness are very much a modern invention. Altruism, for instance, is a French concept from the 19th Century – and gives rise to the secular belief, expressed today by figures like Richard Dawkins and Peter Singer, that it is possible to overcome self-centredness and move towards selflessness. The assumption here, is that there is a two-dimensional sliding scale with a selfish person at one end, and a selfless person at the other. It's difficult to imagine such a mechanised, theoretically measurable, two-dimensional binary scale without the advent of modernity. It is probably why post-modern thinkers like Derrida and Bourdieu have ridiculed the idea of a pure gift, of unadulterated unilateral giving.

If you use the writings of Seneca and of the New Testament as windows into widespread practices of gift giving across ancient Mediterranean communities, it is clear that gift giving is a multi-dimensional activity. Their view of the self was not on some scale between egocentric and self-less. Not even Jesus' great act of self-sacrifice was a selfless act. There was a goal, an expectation in mind. This is a Jesus who acted on the basis of 'the joy that was set before him'. As we celebrate at communion, that the gift of Jesus was poured out for 'all people' – it was, in other words, an indiscriminate gift.

And it is that distinguishes Christian giving and Christian generosity from the kind of giving recognised and recommended by Seneca. The worthiness of the recipient is paramount when it comes to gift giving in the ancient Mediterranean – whereas in the New Testament the worthiness of the recipient is almost irrelevant. In Seneca's world, if you give to an unworthy or ungrateful person, you are acting immorally, squandering your wealth, being irresponsible with the resources entrusted to you.

For Jesus, the moral or financial or social worth of the individual is an utter irrelevance. The worth of the individual beneficiary of your gift is an irrelevance because every person is made in the image of God. And the goal of gift giving is aimed at nothing other than including that other person as a member of the Kingdom of God – that is the basis for any return. And that is precisely why Jesus was always in trouble for being the friend of sinners. His gift is poured out not just for worthy people, or wealthy people, or influential people, or people in a position to benefit him at some point in the future. It is poured out for all people, indiscriminately. This is the Jesus who welcomes sinners and eats with them. This is the Jesus who squanders his gifts upon those unworthy to receive them. This is the prodigal father, who lavishes his gifts upon the worthy and faithful as well as the unworthy, wasteful failure of a son.

Intercessions on Giving

Lord we thank you for privileges we enjoy, for all the good things you have placed at our disposal, for the power in our hands to change the world for better or worse.

So we pray that you will show us how to be responsible with our resources.

When we are aware of chronic hunger, malnutrition and destitution and the enormous differences that can be made by minor sacrifices on our behalf, show us what it means to see, and hear and respond.

When we see ongoing news of families fleeing North Africa to seek life in Europe, risking all that they have and their own lives, subjecting themselves to virtual slavery, show us what it means to see, and hear, and respond.

When we see are content to see justice granted to human beings only on the basis of their economic status, their ethnicity, or their nation state, show us what it means to be generous with the gifts, the insights, and the voices you have given us.

Forgive us when we are content that our political responsibilities stretch no further than the ballot box, when our social generosity reaches no further than the benefit of those closest to us, when our readiness to give extends no further than the change in our pockets.

Open our eyes to the ethical questions that impact both upon how we get our money, and how we spend it. Give us courage to see the world as it is, readiness to accept our place within it, humble enough to receive help, compassionate enough to offer it.

God of reciprocity, show us our true state, how fortunate we are, how much we can do. Show us why we should give, show us what we should give, show us to whom we should give. To the glory of your name.

Dr Nakul Krishna

Story-tellers and (other) Philosophers

2nd June 2019

II Sam 12:1-15; Mt 13:1-23

The story goes that in the American presidential election campaign of 2000, the candidates for the Republican Party nomination were all asked to name their favourite political philosopher. There were many interesting answers available for a would-be president: Plato, or John Locke, or Alexis de Tocqueville. There were also safe answers, something home-grown and uplifting, such as, Thomas Jefferson or Ralph Waldo Emerson. One candidate, a certain George W Bush, had a more unusual answer: his favourite political philosopher, he said simply, was Jesus.

The remark provoked much hilarity at the time. Bush was, it was said, at best stupid, at worst pandering to his evangelical electoral base. And the theme of the sermons this term – ‘Jesus and the Philosophers’ – rather suggests that to think of Jesus as a philosopher would be a category mistake, rather like thinking of a beaver as a kind of self-taught civil engineer. But might there be something to be said for George Bush’s answer?

There have certainly been Christian philosophers through history; but was Christ one of them?

We might think not. Philosophers, after all, come up with theories, and they defend them – persuade others of them – with arguments. ‘Christ disputing with the doctors’ was, to be sure, a favourite subject of Biblical painters. But that was the adolescent Jesus; the grown-up

Jesus, by contrast, is not described in the Gospels as much of an arguer. He sought to change minds, but his usual devices for doing this were not arguments but aphorisms, paradoxes, and most famously of all, parables.

Can a teller of parables count as a philosopher? Some think not. Parables are fictions; philosophers trade in truths. Parables are obscure, in need of interpretation; philosophers strive for clarity and explicitness. Parables convey truths, when they do, by indirection and obliqueness; philosophers convey truths, when they do, by stating them. The story-teller is surely not a philosopher but that awful simulacrum of one, what in Plato’s day was called a ‘sophist’. Or so it might seem, but only if we take a sufficiently narrow view of philosophy and philosophers.

For even in antiquity, there was a more expansive idea of the philosopher. Explicitness, directness, clarity, precision: they had their place. But so too did imagination, creativity and vision. Plato’s dialogues are full of arguments, but they also have stories, myths, allegories, and – though we seldom call them that – parables. And Plato’s reasons for using stories are not all that far off from the account Jesus gives of his reasons for talking in parables: ‘Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given [...] because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.’

Plato, like Jesus, wanted to change hearts and minds. Arguments were one way of doing this: one starts from premises one’s interlocutors accept, and tries to get them to see what follows from what they already believe. In dialogue after dialogue, he depicts Socrates applying this method, and what’s remarkable about it is how often it

could lead to surprising discoveries about both the self and the world. But just as often, the method fails: the interlocutor, usually a posh and self-assured young man rather full of himself, just isn't in the right place to be brought to new discoveries. As the old joke goes about the Irish farmer asked for directions to Dublin: 'I wouldn't start from here if I were you.'

Alas, here is the only place we can start from. Socrates saw that before his interlocutors could be transformed by argument, they had first to be transformed into the sorts of people who could be transformed by argument. That is where the stories came in. Stories bring with them their own worlds, with their own rules. To listen to a story is to accept those rules, and briefly, to inhabit that world. Sometimes, one leaves the story unchanged: 'that was the world of the story,' one thinks, 'but this is the real world'. But sometimes, the story forces you to see that the two worlds are not so different after all.

In the world of Plato's most famous story, Socrates describes people confined to a dark cave, watching an endless succession of shadow plays on the wall while mysterious figures manipulate the puppets behind them. How odd they are, one listener remarks. 'They're like us,' Socrates replies, snapping us back to our world, now seen in a new light. In the world of Jesus's most famous parable, there is a Good Samaritan. What a funny story, some Judean wit no doubt remarked at the time until the penny dropped: maybe there were Good Samaritans outside of the story. And again, when Nathan told David his parable of the rich man and the poor, David was outraged: 'As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die'. And that was when Nathan dropped his bombshell: 'Thou art the man.'

In each of these stories, the story-teller wants the listener to see something. But it won't do simply to spell it out. The story must be allowed to work its magic, by its own rules. If it succeeds, it succeeds in the same way that an argument succeeds: it has brought you over from where you are to where you might be. But crucially, it has not forced you. At every point, it has been open to you to say: No. No, we are not like the people in the cave. And no there are no good Samaritans, and no I am not the rich man in the parable. And it is this openness, this freedom, this possibility of defiance, that means that stories fall short of an old and always questionable philosophical ideal of absolute mind-control.

The American philosopher Robert Nozick once observed, with heavy irony, that philosophers seemed – I quote – '[to] need arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he dies. How's that for a powerful argument? Yet, as with other physical threats ("your money or your life"), he can choose defiance. A "perfect" philosophical argument would leave no choice.' The power of stories is to leave room for defiance.

There have been Christian philosophers and Christian philosophies, but most basically of all, there is a Christian story, or more accurately, a library of Christian stories. They purport, crucially, to be not just one set of stories among others, but stories of a very special kind, stories that tell us about the universe and our place in it. Like the greatest philosophers, Jesus wanted to change hearts and minds. But his voice was most powerful, most persuasive, precisely when he acknowledged that a change of heart comes from within; it is not, cannot be, imposed from without. That preacher preaches best who suggests, asks, invites, and does not demand.

Prof Morna Hooker

Paul in Athens

16/6/2019

Acts 17:16-34

A few weeks ago, the College Director of Development asked a group of Fellows to consider the question 'What makes Robinson Robinson?'. Different answers were given, from our striking buildings – with this chapel at their heart – via the relaxing gardens to our excellent food, but there seemed to be universal agreement that one of Robinson's chief characteristics is that it is known to be a friendly College. We were also asked what it was we hoped for the future. Again, there seemed to be universal agreement that we wanted to preserve the best of what we are, while aiming for academic excellence. No surprises there! What else would you expect from a Cambridge college? Our membership of Robinson means a commitment to seek and extend knowledge, and to develop the wisdom to use our knowledge well. But at the same time, it is important to preserve the best of what we have. And that, in fact, is what Robinson has always been about, for before the College officially existed, the founding Fellows used to meet and discuss what we wanted the College to be: we wanted to be loyal to the best that Cambridge had to offer, while at the same time being open to new ideas – to combine the wisdom of the past with the search for new understanding.

This term we have been thinking about Jesus and philosophy – a word which, as the chaplain reminded us at the very beginning, means simply 'love of wisdom'. We have heard about various philosophers, including Aristotle, Plato and Socrates, Philo and Seneca, and even Jesus himself. But if you wanted to meet the best philosophers in the first century, the place to visit was Athens, the greatest university city of the ancient world, the city where Socrates and Plato and Aristotle had all lived and taught. And it was to Athens that Paul came in the story we heard from Acts just now. Once he arrived, it wasn't long before Paul, being Paul, began to preach the gospel – at first, as was his custom, in the synagogue, to his fellow-Jews – and then in the market-place, where the Athenians were busy with the everyday tasks of buying and selling.

What Paul had to say centred on Jesus and the resurrection, and both of these topics were unknown to his hearers. Indeed, some of them understood the Greek word for 'resurrection' – *anastasis* – to be the name of a goddess. Paul soon attracted the attention of the two prominent groups of Athenian philosophers – the Epicureans and the Stoics. Now the Epicureans, though they were not strictly speaking atheists, denied that the gods had any interest in the world or in humanity, and they denied, too, that there was any existence after death. For them, the most important thing in life was pleasure. It is hardly surprising, then, that they mocked Paul, calling him a charlatan, a mere purveyor of bits and pieces of knowledge – the word used by the author Acts means someone who went round picking up scraps & recycling them. The Stoics were far more open to new ideas, but were wary of Paul's teaching, since he seemed to be preaching foreign deities. If they were anxious to hear more, it was partly because 450 years earlier, Socrates had been sentenced to death on the charge of introducing the youth of Athens to foreign deities. Was Paul equally dangerous? They needed to know more. Accordingly, he was invited to give a guest lecture on the Areopagus.

Guest lecture – or a defence in a court of law? Commentators seem unsure which it was, since the clear allusion to Socrates strikes an ominous note. Was Paul being asked to defend himself against the same charges that Socrates had faced? And was he in danger of meeting a similar fate? Whatever the event may have been, Paul launched into his theme. Beginning – as any wise preacher or lecturer does – with ideas familiar to his audience, he commented on the fact that he had seen in the city an altar dedicated to 'the unknown god'. The Athenians, it would seem, were

good at hedging their bets. But at least it showed that they were open to new ideas. What better invitation could Paul have to tell his hearers about the god whom they didn't know, but whom he did. This is none other than the god who had created heaven and earth, the god of all nations, about whom – and once again, Paul builds on something familiar to his hearers – one of their own Greek poets had written that 'we are his offspring'. How absurd, then, it was to worship idols of gold or silver. This mockery of idolatry would have been familiar to Paul's fellow-Jews from the teaching of the prophets such as the passage from Isaiah[1] we heard earlier, but not to his Athenian audience. This creator god, Paul continued, had raised Jesus from the dead, and through him would judge the world.

The reaction to Paul's oration was mixed. He didn't exactly receive a standing ovation, but neither was he condemned. Some of his hearers scoffed, but others said that they would like to hear Paul again – and that, as any lecturer knows, is an encouraging response. Better still, some of them 'became believers' in the gospel, including one of the members of the council of the Areopagus – a remarkable conversion – and a well-known Athenian woman. Paul could surely have gone to bed that night feeling satisfied with how things had gone.

The book of Acts is sometimes described as 'How the Gospel spread from Jerusalem to Rome' – Rome, the political centre of the ancient world. Once Christianity was established in the Empire's capital, it was poised to spread through the whole western world. But in asking me to speak today about Paul in Athens, the chaplain seemed to be pointing us to another climax in Acts, since with this sermon on the Areopagus, the Gospel has reached the centre of the world of ideas and of philosophy. One of the intriguing things about Paul's sermon as Luke describes it is that it is expressed in language rather different from those which he uses in his letters. Now that could be, of course, because Luke invented the whole thing – or it could be because he knew that Paul addressed his Athenian audience, who had been 'doing' philosophy for centuries, in their own terms. So, building on what they already believed, he opened their eyes to new ideas. And in the years following Paul's visit, the gospel became established in a world where Greek ideas were dominant, and Greek philosophy – in particular Stoicism – became more and more important for the ways in which Christians expressed their beliefs.

And it was theologians trained in Greek philosophy who in the fifth century drew up the so-called Athanasian creed, which will be used today, Trinity Sunday, by some Christians:

. . . . we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. . . . The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. . . .

And so it continues, becoming – to many of us – more and more 'incomprehensible'. Clearly it was drawn up by those possessing analytical minds, who used language which made sense in their culture. But it was a mistake to think that what they wrote would make sense for all time and in all cultures, since, as they themselves so rightly wrote, the mystery of the Godhead is incomprehensible, and cannot be summed up in a creed – and the more complicated the creed becomes, the less we comprehend. An unknown, incomprehensible god – and yet, as Paul told the Athenians, a god who had made himself known, in creation and in Christ. Most of us will find it more helpful to go back to the words of Paul himself, when he expressed what he had experienced of the trinitarian God in his life in words which we repeat so often in this chapel: 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all'. There you have it! The incomprehensible trinity made comprehensible, not in elaborate creeds, but in the experience of believers.

Philosophy is 'the love of wisdom', but it is as well to remember that wisdom is not necessarily the same as knowledge. Wisdom discerns the best of past knowledge, while being open to the exploration of all aspects of truth. Alastair reminded us last week of the danger of having closed minds. The longer one lives in the academic world, the more one realizes how little one actually knows, and the more one despairs of those who claim to have all the answers. Looking to see what others had written about wisdom, I was delighted to find these words in the book of Job: 'Wisdom belongs to the aged, and understanding to the old'.^[2] And so, being myself very ancient indeed, I find myself wondering whether that might be because the old can remember the best – and the worst – of the past, and yet be aware of the possibilities of the future.

And that takes us back to Paul, standing on the Areopagus, reminding the Athenians of their own traditions, but opening their eyes to something entirely new – something which he believed to be true wisdom – the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ. And it takes us back also to our own calling as members of this College, sharing in the traditions which make Robinson what it is, and which we are so fortunate to enjoy, and at the same time endeavouring to explore knowledge and to discover and understand what is at present unknown or poorly understood. May those of you who are about to leave us remember us as the friendly college where you are always welcome, build on what you have learned here, and be open to discover more of the truth which is so much bigger than us all.

[1] Isaiah 40:12-26.

[2] Job 12:12.

Dr Elaine Freer

Fellow and College Teaching Officer in Law

That Was Not The Plan

Graduation Day 2019

Being entrusted with the Graduation address is both a huge honour and a very nerve-wracking task. I talk for a living, literally, but the importance of this day for all of you – in celebrating all that you are, and all that you have achieved, and anticipating all that you will go on to be, means that even for a professional speaker this is rather more special.

For those of you who don't know me; I am a Law Fellow, and a part time College Teaching Officer. With the 67% of my time that is not spent teaching here, I am a practising Criminal barrister, hence all the talking, usually whilst wearing an even more unusual outfit than this. It's a nice change today to be asked to speak in celebration instead of mitigation – because something has gone right instead of because something has gone wrong.

Bizarrely, my life as an academic, and my life as a barrister, are not always as different as one might expect.

One of the things that often strikes me when I am representing clients in court is that committing offences, or at least being accused of committing them, is very rarely what someone had planned for their life. It's extremely rare indeed that a client says to you, 'Oh I ALWAYS wanted to be a bank robber. Decided when I was 12. I just KNEW.' More commonly people are telling you that they committed a crime for many cumulative reasons – coincidence, bad luck, broken families, drug habits, alcohol, bad judgement, passion, lack of education, no prospects, helplessness, homelessness, being bad at making decisions, being angry, being lost, being easily led, wanting to belong, wanting to stand out. For most of my clients, crime was a deviation from what they had planned for their lives, however modest and unassuming those plans might have been.

But, for those of you who have spent the last week, or month, or year, or since you were 11, planning what you wanted to do with your lives, you might feel pretty confident. You have a Plan, with a capital P. You've invested thought into it, time into it, it's the responsible thing to have done. You are ready for the world. There is a Plan!

Now, I confess, I am a lover of a plan. If there was such a thing as Planners' Anonymous, I suspect my partner would suggest very forcefully that I went. Frequently. And for a long time. I have to know what I'm doing ahead of time if I am to be able to relax. Having a plan makes me feel in control in a world that so often feels like it is uncontrollable and out of control. Graduation Day is my favourite day of every academic year...not just because it is the celebration of everyone completing their degrees, but because there is a timetable! On A3 sheets! Pinned to the walls all over College! Everyone knows where they are meant to be and when! Being spontaneous generally comes as naturally to me as it did to Colin Firth's character in the film Mamma Mia. I can be spontaneous, but I have to plan to be. There needs to be a period of time set aside in which I will be spontaneous. You get the picture.

But life has a way of teaching us lessons, and it can be hard to get anywhere if you are as wedded to a plan as I am. If a tame yet impressive elephant strolled into the Chapel now, and laid down beside me whilst I spoke, that would not have been in my Plan. Now I would have nothing at all against that - it'd be a pretty amazing trick for a graduation speech, and you'd all be able to dine out on it for some considerable time. And the lack of an elephant in my Plan for today would not be because it was fundamentally undesirable, but because I would not think it possible

And I think this might be the biggest mischief of being wedded to a Plan. Our Plans are necessarily composed only of the things that we have contemplated for ourselves. We are all limited by the extent of our own faith in ourselves, and belief in what we can do. There may be so much more waiting for us, so much more that we can be and achieve, than what we have envisaged for ourselves. What is possible may be totally different to what we had in mind. Others may see more that we can be, other things and different ways that we can be. Similarly, we are all surrounded by other people who might be limiting themselves by their plans – often realising potential is very much a team activity.

Sometimes the most amazing, terrifying, and wonderful things happen when we allow ourselves to let go of our plans. Applications for jobs that you never thought you would get. Cultivating a friendship out of the blue. Further study; new hobbies, moving city, moving country! Being open to what is happening around us and noticing the world – we need to embrace what the world offers us, even if it was not what we expected.

But perhaps most importantly, I think we should embrace what other people offer us of themselves. The world is, many people would say, becoming a more insular, guarded and thoughtless place. I think all that is probably, sadly, true. But we do not have to add to that. You all have the talents and the awareness not just to not add to that, but to actively try to stem the tide. Let people interfere with your plans, and be open to encouraging others to reconsider theirs. Challenging someone need not be a hostile act – often it is just that it is easier to see where someone else is getting stuck than where we ourselves are getting stuck.

Bizarrely, perhaps, the biggest similarities between my life as a barrister and my College life, and one of the things that has led me more and more to move away from my steadfast commitment to plans is being a Tutor. When students come to you as a tutor with a problem, quite often that problem could broadly be categorised as ‘things not going to plan’. Whether it is academic work, or health (maybe theirs or maybe a family member’s) or relationships or something else, it’s quite rare that a tutee asks to see you, and then bursts through the door shouting ‘it’s all going just the way I planned it’. For me, as a third party, it is much easier to see how there can be opportunities in the midst of some, though sadly not all, ruined plans. But one thing that you are frequently reminded of as a tutor, and when representing clients in court, is the absolute desolation that most of us feel when we are confronted with things outside of the Plan. And when the things outside the Plan are sad and difficult experiences, that is entirely understandable.

But where things are more positive, maybe we should try to open ourselves up to unexpected opportunities which interfere with the Plan, and help create them for others. For those of you who had doubts about applying to Cambridge, or to Robinson, or perhaps who were picked out of the Pool by us, you might recognise those feelings. I hope that now, anyone who did not have Robinson in their Plan, feels that it was an excellent diversion from the Plan.

We admitted every last one of you because we were confident that you knew how to think for yourselves. Over your time here you have thought for yourselves – academically, on the stage, on the sportsfield, on the river, in supervisions, essays and labs. Please don’t ever stop thinking for yourselves. More importantly, don’t ever constrain what you let yourself think about as possibilities; what you want for your life. Be brave, be imaginative, live your lives, don’t watch them, and encourage others to do the same.

For someone who had a Plan when I was in your shoes down the road at Selwyn in 2010, precisely none of my life has abided to it. And now I’m 31, and finally the Plan and I, just like Ross and Rachel from Friends, are ‘on a break’. I

have been ambushed at every turn, contrary to the Plan – personally, professionally and in any other category that you care to mention. Robinson was one of those ambushes. And I'm so grateful for that.

So as we push you out of the safe confines of Robinson, into the world, have a plan if you want one, but don't be afraid to put it to one side in favour of grabbing hold of your life. Just, please, don't go robbing banks.