

Meaning Less

God was pronounced dead a hundred and forty years ago... *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. And since God has died, humanity has scrambled around in a mad panic trying to replace him.

And, by Jingo, we managed it.

How? Why, by turning a verb into a noun. By turning the active word 'meaning' into a static noun to describe some kind of amorphous, unacknowledged form of transcendence – something bigger than us, some great Other. Meaning.

Once the God of Christendom has been erased from our cultural psyche, and all hope of an afterlife has evaporated in the cold light of modernity – how do humans cope with the gaping shadows of their own, eternal non-existence. How do humans cope with the fact that the breath in your lungs, the thumping in your heart, the smile on your face, is all going to cease, and be forgotten – for ever and ever amen? I have spent more than enough time with folk who, at a point of mortal crisis, declare that “they want their life to have meaning.”

What do they mean? Whenever we talk about meaning, it's worth asking that question. What do we mean? That is the question for this evening. We have, as a theme for this term, the question of *How to Read Books...* and of course, meaning plays a pretty central role in that process.

People often talk about the 'meaning' of a text as though there is nothing more to communication than the transfer of information from person A to person B. There is a sender, a message, and a receiver. And communication refers to a successful transaction between these two parties. At the most superficial level, this is quite correct. When I walk into Red Brick and say, “Good morning, I would like an oat milk flat white with two decaf shots and one caffeinated shot,” if I receive the correct drink – then successful communication has taken place. Sender. Message. Receiver.

There is, of course, a two-way street. When certain baristas hear my pretentious and unnecessarily complicated coffee requirements, I am

greeted by eye-rolling, head-shaking, or eye-rubbing incomprehension. Each of these non-verbal reactions convey a message of their own. Sender. Message. Receiver. If the receiver understands what the sender wanted to say, we claim to have grasped their meaning.

Over the last year I probably read around twenty books about listening, and I have yet to find a book about how to listen, that does not assume that communication is nothing more than the correct transfer of information from person A to person B.

However, there is a more basic kind of communication between two parties. At a much more basic, fundamental and important level, communication refers to a coming together, a union, between two parties, that refers to far more than the correct transfer of information. This lies at the heart of Christian practice of so-called 'Holy Communion' – where Christians believe they share a mutual one-ness on the basis of sharing the same convictions and commitments. But there is something similar happening when you have difficult conversations with friends, when you have heart to heart conversation with someone, when you make love, or become a parent, or when you find someone who's experienced the same trauma you have. There is a union, a communion, a coming together that constitutes serious, hard-core communication that runs way deeper than sender-message-receiver. And I wonder if that is something you might ever have experienced when reading a book?

So... back to meaning. It's just a word that refers to carrying, conveying, channelling. Everyone's life has meaning – because we have all received stuff that we inevitably hand on to others, consciously or otherwise, for better or worse. Habits and assumptions and relational norms we have received from our parents – and probably unconsciously hand on to others. So much of what we communicate, much of what we hand on to others, much of what we 'mean', might well remain unknown to us.

There are all kinds of things I communicate without meaning to communicate. I get frustrated all the time with my own kids when they exhibit traits they have clearly received from me, that I had no intention of teaching them. I attended my son's boxing match last night – and I hate

watching it – especially having turned pacifist – I had no intention of producing the kind of young man who seeks affirmation by fighting someone in front of a shouting crowd, I hate it – but it's a trait I handed on to him, for better or worse. Meaning. That is what I handed on to him, even if I don't like it. And everyone is saying, 'like father like son...' if gives me the creeps.

So, the question when it comes to who we are – is not whether our lives have meaning. But what it is exactly, that we are meaning, what are we handing on to others, what is it that shapes our identity, and then has an impact on other people through us. How do the influences that shape me, have a subsequent impact on others? What are the hidden influences that shape our beliefs, convictions, our habits – how conscious are we of how our culture has shaped us?

Can I filter out the negative stuff that has shaped me? Can I ensure that whatever 'meaning' I hand on to others is life-affirming rather than dehumanising? Can I even be conscious of everything that I am communicating? Do I even know?

So when I order my ridiculous coffee – I am doing a bit more than ordering a coffee. I am also declaring that I belong in that minority of earthlings privileged enough to care about my semi-decaffeinated oat milk flat white; when I order more than one such drink on a single day, I am also communicating that I have a caffeine problem; I am also communicating something about my pickiness, my financial status, my health consciousness, my cultural location, my nationality. Every communicative act is a microcosm of who we are.

The belief that we can pin meaning down to a single, defineable, manageable item – is a modernist fantasy. And it is well illustrated by the subversive poetry that is our closing hymn. Number 488.

This is a hymn that was recently proposed as a national anthem, by both Labour and Conservative parties, by the British Nationalist Party on the one hand, and by radical left groups on the other. By both Billy Bragg on the one hand, and Anne Widdecombe on the other! Jerusalem...

Those who attended school in a certain era, or more recently, those who attended a particular type of school, find in this hymn a non-historical celebration of elitist privilege and very frequently describe it as 'too public school'. Naturally, because the tune and the words will evoke memories of a particular interpretation. A celebration of elitist nationalism. But this is not just a long, long way from the intention of its author, William Blake. It is actually the exact opposite. Blake's words are a subversive attack on elitism – as Christopher Rowland claims, to awaken people from their intellectual slumber and free them from an ideology that served the powerful. Blake was not a long way from the historical Jesus, as he sought radical change without overt sedition. In fact, William Blake's seditious behaviour saw him charged for high treason in 1803. That's worth remembering as we sing!

What is the meaning of the text? That depends on what this text communicates to you, and through you. But if you believe an author is worth hearing – is it worth hearing again what William Blake, *meant*? Is it possible to find a union with him, through learning of his context, his track record, his words, and his *meaning*.

This man left a legacy of social justice, at a time when it was dangerous to do so. And I wonder what your and my meaning, our legacy, our impact on the world will be.

Back to the NT reading, and Saint Paul's confidence in his own meaning:

And now, my friends, all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and attractive, whatever is excellent and admirable – fill your thoughts with these things. Put into practice the lessons I taught you, the tradition I have passed on, all that you heard me say or saw me do; and the God of peace will be with you.