

Finding Hope and Courage in a Strange Land

Spirituality for our times

La Côte Anglican church community day at Bossey Ecumenical Institute, 3 Feb. 2024

We were delighted to welcome the Revd Ray Andrews, a retired Anglican priest and Spiritual Director to the Diocese in Europe, to lead our 'Bossey Day 2024' - our church community 'away day', which used to take place annually at the Château de Bossey, but has had a four-year break due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The 'strange land' in the title refers to the verse in Ps. 137, 'How can we sing God's song in a strange land?' The following summary is taken from Ray's notes and questions. The questions were intended for individual reflection, then with the person next to us and, if time, in the larger group.

Intro

The Bossey Day is a celebration of reconnections and new connections. It is also an opportunity to 'intentionally pause' and reflect on our Christian journey.

The idea of pausing on our journey makes me think of those words from Winnie-the-Pooh:

"Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. (And then he feels that perhaps there isn't.)"

So I hope that we can stop bumping for a moment!

Bossey, Session 1: Change

All of us are connected in some way by the experience of living through significant changes during the past few years. Change in ourselves, in our lives and communities, and changes in the world.

When I was initially invited to offer something here today, we were just recovering from the pandemic. We were entering a strange, post-pandemic, land. So my initial thoughts were relatively focused. But since that conversation last year, there have been other significant changes. And although the pandemic and its effects remain highly significant, we have experienced - and are experiencing - other events, changes and uncertainties.

Sometimes it can feel as if we are living in a world of relentless change and uncertainty.

Sometimes it can feel as if each day is a 'strange land'.

Questions for reflection with each other and in larger group):

What changes have been most significant for me?

How do I feel about these changes?

How have I been, or how am I being, changed by these changes ?

These are only suggestions. Please allow yourself to reflect on your own unique experience of change.

Session 1, part 2 (Change contd)

Change can be welcomed and celebrated. Or it can be feared, resisted, or denied.

In Genesis 28.16, we are told of the moment Jacob wakes from a dream where he has met with God:

In the dream, God promised Jacob:

'Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,

Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!

For most of us, as we reflect on time passing – on our journey – we remember times, events, experiences of both joy and sorrow. Perhaps it is easier to recognise God's presence in what has brought us happiness and satisfaction. But it can be more difficult to recognise God in situations that have been difficult or painful for us, or for others.

Occasionally, time will allow us to come to recognise the presence of God in hindsight. A presence that we were unable to recognise at the time. Those aha! moments of revelation when time has passed and a new light and understanding comes.

But we may also experience, or witness, things that feel so far from our understanding, and expectations, of God, that it remains difficult, or even feels impossible, to see anything of God in the experience. Sometimes our most honest and heartfelt cry can be:

God, where were you then?

God where are you now?

And we may need to cry that cry - into the darkness – into the mystery - into what feels like the absence of God.

And yet the gift of faith invites us to hope and to trust in God's presence, wherever we may be whatever may be happening to usto others whatever is happening within us, or around us.

So, in our desire to trust – in our desire to be faithful - we may stifle or silence what we might call our lament (disappointment, anger, grief) – because we fear it suggests a weakening or absence of faith.

Bossey, Session 2: Lament

So, I want to say something about 'permission to lament' ...

Jacob's dream in Genesis has a particular context of course. But it speaks to me of a very human experience: a sense of God's absence.

Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!

And I did not know it.

In my ministry of spiritual direction, I often find with both clergy and lay people that an experience of God's absence – or an experience that feels like the absence of God – can feel like failure, or even guilt or shame.

If only my faith was stronger (as it should be), I would never doubt God's presence.

And then, as people come to feel safe enough, and trusting enough, to express those feelings, I can sometimes feel their relief.

Like the laying down of a dreadful burden they may have been carrying in secret and silence.

It's as though we need permission to lament.

Many of us put a lot of effort into being what and how a real Christian should be (and we all have different versions of that, depending on the traditions, teaching and conditioning we have experienced).

This can make it difficult to access, accept and express our honest experience.

It is sometimes difficult to accept and love some of the deeper truth of ourselves ... our poverties ... our vulnerabilities ... our humanity.

But God doesn't require perfect faith in order to love us. Sometimes a mustard seed is all we have – and sometimes it might feel like we don't even have that.

We don't have to have perfect faith in order to earn God's love, because God loved us first.

God loved us before we learned the various (and often conflicting) ideas about what perfect faith should look like.

It can be very difficult for us to accept how radically unconditional God's love is.

So, I believe that imperfect faith, experiences of fear, doubt and confusion belong to our journey of faith.

And sometimes lament is the most authentic song we can sing.

Even Jesus wept.

And truthful lament can be the place where Grace meets us.

I believe lament and lamenting are fundamental aspects of the human condition. And having the freedom to accept and express our fragilities and vulnerabilities can help us live well for ourselves, for each other and for God.

Strange lands

The pandemic ... the measures and consequences ... were indeed strange lands for us.

It created circumstances that were new for most of us. Conditions we could not control and had little power over.

More recently, we are being exposed to and informed about unimaginable suffering.

We know that human suffering is not new.

However, most of us in Western cultures have grown up with a sense of relative stability. There has been a real, or illusionary sense of predictability and control.

Of course, we will have known personal joys and sorrows, even tragedies. But our context has been relatively stable and to a large extent has allowed us to believe that God is in His Heaven and all is right with the world.

But we live in a strange land that grows stranger by the day.

We may sensibly limit our media consumption, we may use other defences in order to protect ourselves from things that feel beyond our control. But we cannot avoid the awareness that we are witness to and therefore somehow involved in dreadful suffering.

How can we not lament?

But that lament comes from the reality that we are deeply connected – a connection that transcends race, religion, politics, or any of the many differences that we can be divided by.

So lament can be one of our songs.

It reminds us of the miracle that we are alive. And that we care and that we love.

We are connected by suffering, because we are connected by Love.

To silence, or stifle our song of lament is somehow a denial of that.

So, maybe sometimes our truest song in a strange land will be lament and a crying out to God?

God, where are you?

And that cry can be a powerful act of faith, rather than a sign of faith-lacking.

And lament can co-exist with hope. Because they are both expressions of the same love.

So we also have songs of hope.

And we shall move on to reflect on hope ...

Break for lunch:

An opportunity to continue connecting, or reconnecting.

Some time to enjoy each other and to enjoy the beautiful grounds here.

I recommend that you try to remain **gently attentive**

And as John O'Donohue would say:

'Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention'.

Everyone, everywhere, and everything is Holy Ground if we could but see it.

With that in mind, I would like to end this session with a poem by R.S. Thomas, called Bright Field. And it's a nice link to Hope:

*I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying*

*on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

Bossey session 3: Hope, Love, Song

One of the reasons I feel it's important to allow ourselves to lament is that if we consciously, or unconsciously, stifle our lament, we may also stifle Hope and Love.

So, this afternoon I am going to briefly invite us to reflect on Hope and Love and then we'll reflect on the Lord's Song.

*Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy:
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.*

The first verse of Jan Struther's hymn.

If we understand our faith as transformative, then it follows that we are in a constant state of change.

Sometimes we notice it, sometimes we don't.

Often we resist it – there's a kind of comfort in keeping things as they are – and a sense that we are in control.

But, like it or not, we are all, and always, being transformed.

Our faith is a journey and there is a direction.

And as we are invited – and it is always an invitation – to become transformed into the likeness of Christ, I wonder about the place of hopefulness in that?

Hopefulness is an interesting word. Lord of all hopefulness.

A friend said to me recently that she finds hope the most difficult virtue to hold on to, and I understand what she means.

As we learn about hope as children, it is natural that our hope generally has a focus. We hope for something We hope for things seen, or hoped to be seen.

Maybe a gift, an event, the possibility of something good happening.

As we become young adults, our hope naturally focuses on things like achievement, success, acquisition, personal satisfaction in love etc.

Those hopes are sometimes fulfilled and sometimes not. We learn to be grateful for hopes fulfilled, and we learn to cope with disappointment.

It is natural, important, and very human.

But it can become a kind of wishful thinking that we bring into our relationship with God.

Our hoping can remain very focused and we can become convinced that our desires our wishes our hopes align with God's will for us and for others.

We can project our hopes on to God and expect God to fulfil them. Sometimes these hopes are fulfilled and we thank God for doing what we had already decided God should do.

But what about hopefulness?

I believe that what we call hopefulness is something different. Something of God that we are given. That is put into the human heart to be nurtured and cherished.

The words of the hymn go on to qualify hopefulness as something "no care can destroy".

Most of our lives, and certainly the uncertainties of the world, can give us many cares.

This can lead us to abandon some hopes because we become conditioned to believe that they are unrealistic, unreasonable, or impossible.

In the language of the world, we call this maturing, or growing up. Or some would say getting real.

But how do we reconcile that with the hopefulness of God?

What happens to the hopefulness in our hearts that no care can destroy?

I'm going to invite you to take a little time to reflect:

What form does hopefulness take in your own heart? In your life?

Has that hopefulness changed over the years?

In what ways has it changed, and what changed it?

After a time of reflection and sharing:

I wonder what that was like for you?

Try to sit with that for a while, in relaxed attentiveness.

I wonder how easy it was to access your hopefulness?

I wonder if you were aware of other voices, saying things like

"But it's impossible"

"It's unrealistic"

"It could never happen"

"It's naïve, immature, or foolish"

Before long, if you are like me, you will set your hopefulness aside and get on with what you think really matters. What you can control and what is expected of you.

Perhaps hopefulness is hard to hold on to because our true hopefulness hopes for what we cannot see or even imagine.

In his letter to the Romans 8. Paul says:

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Dare I hope for what I cannot see and hardly imagine?

Can I abide in a patient hopefulness?

It is worth gently pondering that with God, in prayer.

Break

Love:

³*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*
(1 Corinthians 13:13)

Let us now reflect on Love:

The poet William Blake believed that the purpose of our existence is to learn to bear the beams of love.

Let me quote him:

*“And we are put on earth a little space
That we might learn to bear the beams of love.”
William Blake*

But **to bear** love can have three meanings:

To endure it,
to carry it
and to bring it forth.

To endure it:

To grow in our capacity to endure love's beauty and pain.

We long for God's love, but there are many reasons we may resist it. I think George Herbert describes this beautifully in his poem, Love:

*LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.
'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.'*

*Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 'Who made the eyes but I?'*
*'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'*
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
So I did sit and eat.

To carry it:

How do I carry and share love?

Do I live as a loved person? Freely giving, what I have freely received?

And to bring it forth:

How do I give birth to new love into the world?

Again, Paul's words in Romans 8:

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation,
but we ourselves.*

Dare I birth love for people and situations that appear to be unlovable?

This can be a painful birth.

I invite you to reflect on love a little while, but this can be a very personal reflection, so I invite you to reflect on this individually.

Again, some suggested questions for reflection

Do I resist God's love?

Do I share God's love?

Dare I birth new love to the unlovable?

Maybe this is the key to our unique song. The willingness to receive, share and bear God's love.

Becoming God's love, in our own unique way

In our final session we will look at our unique song.

Bossey Final Session: Song

On my study wall, above my computer, I pin various things that can inspire, or encourage me poems, quotes etc

All very simple stuff. Sometimes quite childlike – but in some way they give me hope and they give me courage. I would like to share one of those with you:

*It's not too late ... the angel said
Even though the world's a mess ...
Even though you're not as young ...
Even though you've made mistakes and have been afraid
It's not too late ...
And then I saw the world through the angels' eyes
I saw the colours I could paint
The songs I could sing
The lives that I could touch
The dreams that could still come true
And it became very clear to me
That it's not too late.
(Ron Atchison, Mayor of Inspiration Peak, Peace Hero)*

If it is true that we – meaning each one of us and the whole of God's creation – are being loved into becoming – then it would be true to say that we are always in a strange land. Transformation – change – is inevitably part of our journey.

So, even when things change, become unfamiliar, or chaotic and it feels like we are in a strange land – we can also say, paradoxically, that we are at Home. We might say, with Jacob, 'Surely God is in this place and I did not know it'.

So, how do we sing the Lord's song in this strange land that is also home?

If the Lord's Song is Love, and a song of becoming, and I believe it is - and if we are each invited to sing along, and I believe we are,

How do we do that?

What does that mean?

Christian mysticism would suggest that our journey with God and in God is essentially mystery.

But because mystery and not knowing can be so hard for us, I think there is a temptation to take control and write our own song. We all do that to some degree.

But I wonder if there is another way. (Another way of coming down the stairs without banging our head on every step).

I have suggested in various ways today that faith, hope and love are always in our hearts, whether we are aware of it, or not. We don't have to learn them, or acquire them.

But our fears, anxieties, insecurities and cares can lead to us defending and protecting them in such a way that they are stifled, or silenced. Never destroyed – but less alive than they could be. Fear does that. That's why the lovingly repeated words of Jesus were, and are, "Do not be afraid".

So, perhaps our song, like the Lord's Song, is more about revelation.

What I mean by that, is that we don't have to – in fact we cannot – create our own song, because God has already created it.

And as we recognise and let go of the obstacles – the fears, the false hopes, the doubts – our song is freed and revealed.

It may be a small song, it may be a great song. You may notice it – you may not - but in each of us a song is revealed that is a valued and necessary part of the great symphony we cannot yet see or hear.

We are offered glimpses in scripture – glimpses through a glass darkly.

But we also have a legacy of glimpses given to some Christian mystics. Very human, imperfect souls who have glimpsed the fulfillment of the hope that is as yet unseen by most of us.

Teresa of Avila – nada te turbe

Julian of Norwich – all shall be well

Out of their troubled lives and the troubled worlds they inhabited they glimpsed these simple, but profound reassurances that came from a deep knowing in their hearts and have been passed on to us.

For me, one of these most inspiring glimpses was recorded by the American Trappist monk and mystic, Thomas Merton. I would like to read it to you. And perhaps, as we began the day, you might want to free your hands, rest your eyes, and listen with a relaxed attentiveness.

Thomas says

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . .

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . But this cannot be seen, only believed and ‘understood’ by a peculiar gift.”

Hope and Courage in a Strange Land – A spirituality for our times.

Relinquishment of “knowing”, to allow a more profound “knowing” to be revealed.

The courage to not know.

Perhaps one of the most courageous things we can say in our times is “I do not know”.

So, maybe the spirituality of our times is a spirituality of unknowing.

I think that's very hard for us - in an age of reason "knowing" is highly valued and rewarded.

Some of the changes we are experiencing globally are about competing ideologies – competing certainties – competing "knowings".

There are competing pressures to align ourselves with one particular "knowing".

So to "not know", or "un-know" can be a radically courageous position to take. A radical humility. A Strange Land in which to choose to abide.

But there are different types of knowing and perhaps one type needs to be surrendered/relinquished for a more profound and truer knowing to be revealed and lived.

A Strange Land, that paradoxically is Home. Where we can abide in God's loving presence, love and hopefulness.

I invite you to reflect on "not knowing", or "unknowing".

- *What is that like emotionally – what does it feel like?*
- *What is that like cognitively – what are your thoughts?*
- *What is that like physically – how is your body reacting?*

We ended our day with a short Holy Communion service, during which Ray talked a little about Mother Julian of Norwich and quoted from her writings two of her most well-known revelations:

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

Would you learn to see clearly your Lord's meaning in this thing? Learn it well: Love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love ... Why did he show it to you? For Love ... Thus I was taught that Love was our Lord's meaning (from 'Revelations of Divine Love', ch. 86).