

Frankie Ward – after-starter address, BIAPT 25 Years Celebration Dinner

The Crypt of The Roman Catholic Cathedral, Liverpool

Wednesday 10 July 2019

It was a heady conference – 1994. The first time I'd been with such a vibrant community where the welcome and friendship meant I felt I belonged, almost immediately.

A heady conference: particularly as the phrase The Living Human Document took hold of my imagination – inspired by such as David Lyall and John Foskett, of blessed memory.

A heady conference, as BIAPT was born, and we thrashed around the difference between pastoral and practical, seeking to honour roots, but also to bear fruit in different directions.

A heady conference – but also one where, in the final session, we did theology from our bodies. Where is your theological passion located, I asked the participants? What does it mean for theology to be truly embodied in you?

Today I ask myself the same question. I turn myself, still, after all these years, into a living human document, seeking to read where my body is stirred, better to discern God's will, God's concern.

Also, from those early conferences, David Lyall's perception, that I've never forgotten, that it is in the ordinary that grace breaks through. Grace breaks through.

Today, doing theology from my body, and the anxiety hits me hard. Pole-axes me.

To continue the theme of the Living Human Document – with its appreciation of documents – verbatims, diaries, journals – I want to share, with his permission, a correspondence of letters with Rowan Williams, mine to him; his to me – after I read his book *Christ The Heart of Creation*.

I wrote to him because Jem Bendell's paper *Deep Adaptation* had made such an impression. If you haven't read it, please do. It can be found at <https://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>

The paper is a year old this month and has gone viral with half a million views.

He is one of the founders of Extinction Rebellion.

So in Holy Week I wrote to Rowan of my extreme anxiety about climate catastrophe and how hard it is to find a way through, theologically, to any sense of hope for the future. My body was screaming with anxiety, especially at three in the morning; and I felt very alone, feeling the full force of God's fierce anger at the disruption of the natural law and patterns that order creation. The questions were – are – profound: what happens to the whole narrative of Christianity – or any religion, come to that – if what we face is extinction? If the social order breaks down, as a result of inevitable climate catastrophe, such as Bendell predicts?

I asked Rowan what happens, if no longer humanity is around – because of anthropogenic climate collapse – to the narrative structure of creation, sin, forgiveness and redemption. I said I felt perpetually stuck in the garden of Gethsemane; unable to feel hope or joy as Easter comes around again. How every time I see a swallow, I simply think 'One year, they won't come.' And I feel like crying.

He responded like this:

Dear Frances

The best I can do in response, thinking aloud, as it were, is something among these lines –

The history of the universe is importantly like the history of any finite agent – i.e. there is a real risk of catastrophe and loss. In the foreground, tragic loss is never ruled out, for any individual or for the environment of this planet. God's providence doesn't mean that happy endings are guaranteed, as we all know, and this seems to be the case with the environment as well as the individual.

Two but. First, whether with individuals or the planet, outcomes are not utterly fixed such that no turning to grace or hope is possible. Even a short moment of turning back to harmony with God is of supreme worth ('If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would plant a tree' – Luther, apparently). Just as – a difficult and painful analogy – the message of love texted to a partner or child by someone in a plane plummeting towards a crash is a moment of grace, even if there is no outcome that would make us 'content' with the tragedy. Something terrible is simply going to happen, unavoidably – but there is a turning towards light that is still open.

Second but ... God's commitment to creation is absolute, such that not even the greatest rebellion or disaster can extinguish it. The creation as we know it changes and decays – more rapidly now and more hideously than we could ever have expected; but faith claims that God's yes to what God has made is not silenced. How that is realised, how God 'honours his word in all things' (Julian, I think), defies our conceptualising. Again, it isn't a 'happy ending' scenario, simply a claim that God does not go back on the divine covenant with what's been made. Traditionally, this is where the promise of God continuing to relate to us on the other side of death comes in.

Crucially these two qualifications don't give either an alibi for labour and effort or a comforting 'all right in the end' picture. They simply suggest that hope in God is just that: hope, not prediction. And hope is a condition here and now; not a foretelling of what lies ahead, and certainly not an inoculation against loss, but the affirmation that God is bound to the finite reality that God loves ('How can I give you up, O Ephraim?'), and it is God's business to honour that binding. Meanwhile, we keep ourselves open to the God who acts and speaks in the present, and we labour at whatever we can do to prevent catastrophe, even if we are fearful that all our effort is too late. We still celebrate the swallow in the moment: anticipating loss can be a way of slipping away from a gift that is here and now. Without the celebration now, the loss would actually be softened, in a strange way. The risk of loss gives the joy a kind of fierceness.

Rowan's words brought me to tears, and to an enormous relief from the fear. He took seriously what I was saying and through his words, God's grace breaks through. He inspired me into my next book, to be published next Spring – *Like there's No Tomorrow: Lamenting the Future with a Fierce Hope*. Forgive the plug.

I am really pleased that next year's conference is on the environment.

Let lament be at its heart.

It seems to me that BIAPT and Practical theology – particularly with its roots in pastoral care – has so much to offer humanity as all of us come to terms with what Rowan calls the 'something terrible that is going to happen, unavoidably'.

We need, as David Lyall reminds us, to be always looking out for the ways in which God's grace breaks through. Rowan's letter was such a moment for me.

I pray that this community can be a means for God's grace to break through for the world around us. For there is a great deal of work to do, to bear the fruit of hopefulness into the future.

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