

Voices from the Edge

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Hugh Price Hughes Lecture, March 2018

Losing a voice

It is an odd experience to spend Holy Week in hospital. Just when our thinking and praying is so focused on the journey of Jesus towards Gethsemane and Golgotha, to spend days and nights cut off from familiar places and faces, completely dependent on the skill and kindness of others, and surrounded by others whose frailty or brokenness has brought them here, is a searching and transforming experience. I spent ten days in hospital, and was sent home on Good Friday. Others in that ward included a man who did not like to be covered up—he would throw off the sheets and lie stark naked during the day, then wander around the ward at night, occasionally sitting on the floor beside my bed and wanting to hold my hand. Then the staff would gently but firmly take him back to his own bed. All my reading of the Gospel stories of cross and resurrection was touched by the time spent with that man. He never spoke a word.

At the time I was Senior Methodist Tutor in the Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, and I was supposed to be leading a retreat for a group of students training for ministry. I was part of a staff team that always seemed stretched to breaking point. My long illness, part of a depressing history of illnesses, was the last straw. I was told I needed to resign and be replaced by someone who could work more reliably.

So if we are thinking about voices from the edge, I need first to tell you how terrible it felt to lose my voice, to lose the capacity to do the kind of speaking I was used to. I felt a bit like the naked silent man in the hospital ward. And that began a process of questioning that continues to this day. If ministry could not be *that*, what was it to be? And I wrote that questioning as a poem: *Servant Song*.

Poem 1: Servant Song

Strange Meetings

After leaving Queen's I moved into a very different sort of existence. More like that hospital ward. I felt it as a curious mixture of space and constriction. My diary was suddenly almost empty. And yet the space in which I lived was dramatically reduced. Often I was, and still am, simply housebound. And without colleagues and students and committees, suddenly I was often alone.

In this lecture I want to emphasise two great surprises for me in this whole story. The first is a very odd thing about solitude—that it can be a shared experience. There are others there with me in the emptiness, others who know all about lying awake at night. On the edge of things, there are others, also trying to make sense of the mystery of being alive. I began to come across them in a series of strange meetings that have in turn helped me to discover more deeply the God who is the Heart of the World and the Heart of my own heart.

Plato's cave in reverse

In *The Republic* Plato tells the allegory of the cave. Unenlightened humanity is chained in a cave and can see reality only as flickering shadows on the cave wall. Behind them, out of their sight, is the real world and the bright sun.

The move into uselessness was a bit like running that allegory backward, a descent into the depths. I went from being in the bright light, the apparently real world, into a place of darkness and confusion. Like falling through a hole in the ground, where I found myself felt like simple darkness, cut off from the things by which I made sense of my life. But if you spend a while in the darkness, you slowly become accustomed to seeing differently. You begin to notice things that were there all along. And if you can find a light, then a cave can be one of the most spectacularly beautiful sights. Hidden from ordinary sight, a place where water and gravity and slow ages have worked miracles, just waiting to be discovered.

I began to learn patience, especially with my own body. I began to forgive myself for letting people down, letting Christ down. I began to attend to those flickering shadows, not simply appearances masking a deeper, more real world, but the beginnings of prayer, touching something that is deep and right beneath our feet, often unnoticed simply because we live on the surface of things.

I don't want to play down the awfulness of illness, loneliness and fear. But I don't believe I would ever have noticed those depths in the brightness

and the busyness of life and ministry before falling into the cave. Without the chains of isolation and breathlessness it would be easier to walk away and leave the discoveries and the fear behind, and my life and ministry would be impoverished then.

Plato saw the people in the cave as the unenlightened in need of a philosopher teacher. I don't know about that. But as I have begun to learn to pray, I have also begun to discover a sort of kinship with others there in the dimness, people who have either lost their voice or perhaps never had one. And now I often feel like an outsider. In cafes or on buses or park benches, I meet others and somehow we share the strangeness of life.

Poem 2: Edge-folk

Poem 3: Wanderers

Nicodemus and the Night Questions

In *Servant Song* I mention Nicodemus and his bewilderment. That story from John's Gospel has been a guide for my own encounters with Christ in the night time. Being born again, as Jesus points out, does not come naturally. It is a matter of grace.

I live much of the time with a sense of uselessness, of being discarded and having nothing to offer. That can be particularly acute if I am awake in the night, having difficulty breathing. And like Nicodemus I go then in the night-time to Jesus with my questions.

Looking back on active ministry, I can honestly say that I wish I had learnt to pray sooner! Not the formal or practical prayers I was used to, but this searching, wrenching, longing, breathless breathing in the Spirit.

Nicodemus starts by declaring what "we know". He is an expert in the law, a teacher of Israel, religiously serious and with a clear sense of what comes from God. And he recognises the strangeness of Jesus. That strangeness is the starting point. He knows and yet knows that he must be missing something. Jesus just doesn't fit within his sense of how God works.

There are direction indicators in the Nicodemus story. Coming from and going to. Lifting up and coming down. Being born again and a prediction about dying. Those direction indicators begin to get mixed up by the mystery of the Cross. Lifting up on the cross is also exaltation that looks like shame, defeat that is somehow victory. And being born again will involve a kind of dying.

So I know the bewilderment that Nicodemus knew. How to begin again, to start out as though life were just beginning. How can a lifetime of understanding and familiarity and routine be replaced by that freshness, newness,

calling-everything-by-new-names openness to discovery characteristic of a newborn child?

And it turns out that being born again involves a kind of dying, a necessary letting go of some cherished beliefs. Amazing grace! Even that dying then can be the beginning of something quite new and astonishing. After many nights of night questions I began to recognise or to understand Jesus' answer to the questions I had not even yet articulated. I heard in the Nicodemus story the words about being born again, but heard them now not as hard demand, something I had to achieve, but rather as a laughing clue that helped me to look at the mystery in a new way.

What Jesus offers to Nicodemus and offered to me and keeps on offering to me, is an invitation to wonder—with the topsy-turvy world of the Cross at the heart of things and the wind of the Spirit shaking the trees. Here!—Look at things with the fresh eyes of a newborn, notice the world that is under your nose, recognise the familiar as strange and beautiful and terrible. Listen for the wind that shakes the trees and messes up the familiar shapes and directions of things. But *listen* for the wind.

Christ as Fellow-patient

Strange meetings then. Amongst the edge-folk and the wanderers I am coming to a new understanding of who Christ is and how Christ is present both as a sign of contradiction and as the power of hope in the world. He is there in the night and in the depths and on the park bench and in the hospital ward. And he is there precisely as a fellow-patient, the naked man kneeling beside me. Away from the bright light, without a voice, I keep having these strange meetings.

In 1 Corinthians St Paul tells us that the Good News of the Cross is a stumbling block and foolishness. A stumbling block impairs our walking, causes us to stumble. A message that seems foolish disturbs our minds. So the message of the Cross of Christ comes to us as a kind of *physical and mental impairment*. *We are disabled by it*. So, as hearers of the word, we have to become in some sense, disabled. If our faith is of the sort that seeks signs, then the message of the Cross seems so unlike the usual religious expectations and convictions: God as the one who gets things done, as Ruler, as Judge, as the one who (eventually) brings down the wicked and lifts up the innocent. But the Cross is about the death of an innocent, and somehow also the triumph of the wicked. How can that be Good News? How can it be God at work? And if our faith is the kind of philosophical faith that seeks eternal truths, contemplates deep spiritual matters, we will be shocked and

repelled by the sheer physicality, the bodiliness, the being-rooted-in-history particularity of this event. And we will be left wondering how anything true and eternal could be refined from the mess. So in some ways the message of the Cross comes to us as a word of physical and mental impairment, of stumbling and foolishness that disables our will to power and our search for eternal truth.

In *Edge-Folk* and *Wanderers* I tried to say something about what it is like to be on the edge, to sit with others who do not fit in, the strange ones. I meet them in caf  s, hospital wards, on buses and at bus stops. And sometimes I feel more at home in their company than anywhere else.

I think there is something about the oddness of the strange ones that runs through the message of the Cross. It is shameful and glorious, criminal and innocent, brutal and loving, marginal and absolutely central. Jesus is crucified outside the city, with two other outsiders, while the religious and political establishment tortures and mocks. He is paraded through the streets, made the subject of scorn, broken and abandoned. And somehow *this* is God's scandalous salvation of the world.

So there is something important about uselessness. Living with impairment it is easy to define myself by what I cannot do, or can no longer do. And in a church that emphasises ministry as primarily about getting things done, that can feel like uselessness. One of the hardest things is to put that uselessness into God's hands, not so that God can *use* it, that is simply a pious way to stay with the getting things done way. But rather to recognise that the uselessness is also about discipleship, it is a staying with the Christ who is stuck there on the Cross. Following need not mean journeying onwards, it might mean staying with the pain and the abandonment.

Back to the hospital ward. I have often noticed a difference in the quality of the relationships and especially the conversations and the shared silences when I am in hospital as a patient and when I am there as a pastoral visitor. It is the difference between being-with the other and being-in-it-with one another. When I am a patient I cannot simply walk away when the visit is done.

Sometimes being-in-it-with can mean being isolated. As well as the physical struggle to breathe, to have some energy, I also experience bouts of depression that isolate me from everything and wrap me in fog and grey and make time stretch into emptiness. Being with and being alone are two sides of living with disability, and they are both Jesus' experiences from Gethsemane to the tomb. Here is no saviour somehow set apart from us, but one of us, going through what we all to some extent go through, and staying with it, not walking away when the visit is over. That insight—that Jesus on the

Cross is not God's way of curing the sickness of the world, but rather God's way of staying with us in the brokenness—is something that is very difficult and mysterious, but also rich with possibilities. It undermines our religious impatience: surely salvation ought to be about making everything right, the triumph over evil, the rescue from hell, the removal of doubt and fear? We can even see the Resurrection as just such a “happy ever after” ending—until we recall Thomas' demand to see the marks of nails and spear that prove that the body of the Risen One is the body of the Crucified. The love of God, as much as the nails, hold Jesus here in this staying-with.

The Cross then is not God's way of stepping into the ward of the world, healing everyone and emptying out the ward. It is God's commitment to be a fellow-patient, to share the emptiness and to open up new possibilities for creativity there, just there where the pain and confusion are. And not just for the hours of the dying on the Cross, but for ever.

PH7 as a way of being church

Thinking about strange meetings, I must mention PH7. This is a group that meets, roughly monthly, at Selly Oak Methodist Church. The PH stands for Pain and Hope. And originally it had seven members, hence PH7. The members are people from the church who live with pain and hope, and when we meet we simply tell each other “how it has been for me” since we last met. And, ordinary as that sounds, something extraordinary happens in the sharing of stories. We discover meaning, hope, possibility together. God's creativity in our woundedness. And for me it has become a model for a different way of being church. Not to replace the other stuff. But to sit alongside it and to be a safe place for difficult honesty and a reminder of who we are and what God is like.

Poem 4: PH7

Finding a voice

So I have told of the difficult moment of losing a voice. I have told stories of night questions, Plato in reverse, hearing the scandalous Good News and sharing words and silences with fellow pilgrims. I have told of strange meetings, with those outside the church, those inside who are often overlooked, and somehow in those strange meetings also, a new recognition of Christ as fellow-patient. God being-with and being-in-it-with us. Now I want to say a little bit about how those strange meetings slowly gave me a voice, a way of speaking and writing theology from the heart. When I taught those

training for ordained ministry, I often told them that the most important thing in ministry was to be themselves, to discover and to be the person that God was calling. It turns out that was much harder than I had estimated. Finding my own voice has not been easy, and as so often happens, others saw and heard it before I could.

Poem 5: A Clearing

I used that poem as part of a morning service, part of a reflection on discoveries of grace. And it spoke to many people in a way that sermons often miss. The language is deliberately straightforward, and yet the experience being described goes very deep. And at Synod one day, someone who had read some of the poems said: “You are finding a different way of doing theology.”

Slowly I am coming to see that he was onto something. If God is truly the Heart of the World and the Heart of my own heart, then attending to the gift and the mystery of existence, attending to the silences in my own life, simply noticing the strangeness in the people I meet, open up new discoveries of meaning and truth and goodness. When I put some of that wonder as sheer surprise into words, somehow I find that I am caught up in a different sort of ministry: living and proclaiming the Good News that God is with us and in it with us.

Earlier I said that there have been two great surprises in this whole story. Here is the second, and it is something I do not believe I would ever have recognised so clearly if I had not gone through that process of losing and finding a voice. When I tell or write about what I am going through, I find again and again that I am genuinely speaking to others. The things that connect us, that put us in touch with that vast reservoir of shared insight and understanding, are precisely the things that we go through when we feel most alone. Everyone faces night questions—and everyone faces them alone. There is a paradoxical solidarity in loneliness. Those strange meetings, with edge-folk, with a naked fellow-patient, with PH7 and with the Crucified and Risen one, are encounters with others who know what it is to live on the edge.

Not at home here

This series is called Voices from the Edge. Those on the edge, far from the busy centre of things, do not fit in. And that can be a sign of hope and the seed of something new. Not being at home here signals the possibility of a different world. So finding my voice, learning to do theology in a way that

touches the deep things without using churchy language, listening to and sharing the silences with other strange ones, has become a matter of hope.

Poem 6: Migrants

Poem 7: Hope

When I listen to the voices from the edge, I wrestle with the other half of St Paul's message: the Cross of Christ as the power and the wisdom of God.

Those conversations or shared silences in hospital or on a bus are often surprisingly wonderful and creative. Something life-giving happens there. Something that emerges out of the time spent together, slowly perhaps and easily missed if you're in a hurry. The strangeness of the Cross is that this being-with and being-in-it-with, is also the presence of God, the Creator and life-giver. Surprisingly the folly and weakness of the Cross brings about the possibility of a new world, opens up new being. And the strange skies and strange songs of the edge-folk do not fit the sense and predictability of the present world. They point towards something different.

Hope is always disruptive. It is about a vision of the world made new, made differently, where the edges turn out to be close to the heart of things. That vision is more easily held by the strange ones, the ones who are not at home here. But it is contagious, anyone can catch it and be caught by the possibility that the grey can be covered in God's graffiti, that the concrete can be cracked by the emerging green, that the fidget child is, after all, the one who opens up the truth for us. When we begin to notice the wind that shakes the trees, we are no longer at home here. That is both disturbing and liberating.