

Hugh Price Hughes Lecture
Fragility: the shocking new 'f' work for the Church
Martin Johnstone (17th April 2018)

Liberation Theology introduced us – or at least me – to the understanding that the discipline of theology is always a second act;¹ our context shapes what we see and how we act; reflecting on faith in the light of what we see and do is the task of theology or, at least, the sort of theology that I am committed to. And so, I should begin by making clear the well from which I drink,² the streets on which I walk or, as Donna Haraway might put it, my 'situated knowledge.'³

I am an ordained minister within the Church of Scotland living in Glasgow. The first part of my ministry was spent as a parish minister in a housing scheme where I met some amazing people. The second stage was spent in what I still would probably describe as the best job in the world, at least for me, supporting the Church of Scotland's work in the economically poorest neighbourhoods in Scotland; wonderful, amazing, incredible places. And most recently, I have been supporting the Church's political and social engagement, trying to connect what are the policy, cultural, practical and partnerships shifts that are needed. I spend part of my time trying to remind the Church that we need a good dose of humility – no-one takes us that seriously these days – and the other part of my time trying to remind politicians that the Church still has more people who turn up at our weekly meetings than theirs.

I love the Church and relate to Augustine's description of the Church as our mother – "The Church is truly the mother of Christians."⁴ Part of that is knowing

¹ Boff, C (2009) *Theology & Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, Wipf & Stock

² Gutierrez, G (2012) *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, SCM Press

³ Haraway D (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Free Association Books

⁴ Augustine, *De moribus Ecclesiae*, I, 30, 62-63: PL 32, 1336

that I loved my mother and know just how much she loved me from the moment of my conception to the moment of her death. Nonetheless, there were days when she really used to do my head in! So yes, the Church is like my mother! I know that she has given me life and guided me through life, always concerned for my wellbeing, but there are many days when she does my head in.

In recent years I have stumbled, largely thanks to my mother although she did not know it, across the word ‘fragility’ and I have begun to play about with the possibility that this might be a useful lens to understand the gospel message and the attitude⁵ of the church for today.

When I was probably about seven or eight, my mother was cleaning out the china cabinet in our dining room. At one point she took the wedding china of my great grandmother – I think that it is my great grandmother – out of the cabinet and placed a cup into my cupped hands. “Now Mart,” she said, “be very careful with that. It’s very fragile.”

The best part of 40 years later, when we were clearing out the china cabinet after my Mum had died, we came across that cup and I started thinking about her words: “Be very careful with that; it’s very fragile.”

It struck me then and it strikes me still: ‘fragility’ is a word that has different edges to it. It does give a sense of something that may be easily damaged. The word is, unfortunately, often used pejoratively: “She’s a fragile soul.” “The situation is increasingly fragile.” But that’s not what my mother meant when she used to the word. I think that she meant something quite different, didn’t she? She meant that something needed to be held with great care; that it was

⁵ I use the word ‘attitude’ deliberately. It is about a way of framing our presence in a deliberately humble stance.

precious; and of great value if not in economic terms then certainly in terms of what it meant to us as a family.

There is a form of Japanese pottery, Kintsukuroi (literally meaning to repair with gold), where the real beauty of the pots lies in the way that the cracks have been repaired.⁶ From my understanding they are often repaired using precious materials. And surely that is a metaphor for so much of life: it is often the cracks that let the light in, that are the most beautiful. The fragile is not just easily damaged; it's beautiful. Sometimes, and we will know this, it is the fact that something is slightly damaged or flawed that makes it particularly beautiful and striking. Often the most 'fragile' people and places are the most stunning and beautiful.

Of course, there are other words that you could use; 'vulnerability' for example. And there is much in favour of using such a word. It covers much of the same territory; its etymological roots connect it with 'woundedness' (vulnus: wound; vulnerare: to wound) and so with the scars of the crucified and risen Christ. But I believe, despite that, it lacks the multi-dimensional texture of fragility, a word that continues to hold together precariousness and preciousness.

This evening, I want to share some musings on the clear understanding that that is what they are: provisional and not yet fully formed. I hope that in the discussion which follows you will help me (and us) to go deeper and understand with greater clarity. My suggestion is that 'fragility' is indeed the shocking new word that the Church needs to embrace; and that we need to rid ourselves of a current management-focused ecclesiology which seems to owe more to the market than the gospel.

⁶ You can find out more at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/luminous-things/201510/resilience-growth-kintsukuroi>.

I am going to focus primarily on the idea of a fragile church (so questions around ecclesiology) but before I do so I want to try to demonstrate how, I believe, the word is useful on a broader theological, social and economic canvas.

I have a friend who has a problem with alcohol. He is an incredible, talented, brilliant young man but he is almost certainly only one drink away from oblivion. Perhaps the greatest danger he faces would be to imagine himself strong enough to go back to the booze but that this time he could manage it. You could describe his life as fragile and he needs constantly to recognise that he is not as strong as he might imagine. Indeed, you could describe each of our lives as fragile: life is both precious and precarious. The problem is that we have got into the business of denying our fragility. And so, increasingly as a society, we lack the tools to live with the reality of weakness and fragility. When we hear someone has a terminal illness, we find it easier to look for cures than to accept what lies ahead. Life is fragile.

I have been privileged to spend a significant part of my life in and around some of the Scotland's economically poorest neighbourhoods. I would not deny for a moment that there are struggles and despair within them, but I must also say that, in my experience, they are amazing places with some of the most incredible and generous people on the planet. Regeneration experts are often focused on how they can make those 'poor neighbourhoods' look more like 'wealthy communities' but although I want to resist the obscenity of poverty with every fibre of my being, I am not convinced that this is the right way to proceed. I would prefer to think about these as 'fragile' communities – beautiful, precious, precarious places. My friend Ann Morisy,⁷ one of our very best community theologians of the last 30 years, talks about how challenging it is that whilst

⁷ Ann has been responsible for a wide range of books and articles over the last number of decades. Amongst my favourite is: Morisy, A (2006) *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission*, Continuum.

society wants the poor to become rich, and so to fulfil the notion that economic growth is possible, the gospel challenges the rich to embrace poverty. Let's be clear; this is not about an acceptance of poverty which is blasphemy to God, but it is a deep questioning of the market's ability to solve the problems. It is to suggest that redistribution as opposed to wealth creation can more effectively address the inequalities of our time.

We live on a fragile planet: temperatures have already risen beyond a level at which future life is likely to be sustainable; ocean levels are rising; species which have roamed the earth for millions of years are becoming extinct. Yet still we behave as if we can carry on destroying the planet in the vain hope that another one is just around the corner for our children and grandchildren; for their children and grandchildren.

Then, let's consider the economy. We seem to continue to operate on the principle that the economy can just keep on growing – unfettered or 'selfish capitalism' as Oliver James might term it.⁸ The best book on economics that I have read in recent years is Kate Raworth's brilliant *Doughnut Economics*.⁹ In it she draws some stark pictures of an economy in which we are falling off the cliff edges of human and environmental survival. We need to recognise that we live as fragile human beings, in fragile communities, on a fragile planet with a fragile economy. And when I say these things I mean beautiful and precious as well as precarious.

This leads me to begin to want to ascribe tentatively this term fragility to the God story and, indeed, to God. In creation, in the wilderness, in exile, in prophets, in Jesus, in the Spirit, God seems to have turned God's back on

⁸ James, O (2008) *The Selfish Capitalist: Origins of Affluenza*, Vermilion

⁹ Raworth, Kate (2018) *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*, Random House Business.

strength, power and permanence and chosen fragility instead. The stable. The cross. Even the empty tomb. Fragile signs of a fragile God, or at least of a god who chooses fragility. I might actually prefer the former: it might not even be that God chooses fragility; it might even be that God's very nature is fragility.¹⁰ How transformative is that!

All of this leads me to a critique of the Church, remember a church I love and to which I believe I owe my life and faith. I have increasingly come to the conclusion that our ecclesiology may owe far more to the quest for power and permanence than living out our calling to witness humbly to the God of life in the midst of death what George Zachariah poetically talks about as the 'tense present.'¹¹

From the earliest centuries of the church; really from the point when, with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity (or more accurately the conversion of Christianity to the marks of the empire) the Church has struggled to fulfil her calling to be light and yeast. In more recent years, when the power of Christendom no longer holds sway and the Church in the wealthy North no longer has the power to demand allegiance and loyalty, I would suggest that our focus on growth might have a greater proximity to neo-liberalism than to the Gospel. The late Professor John Hull suggested that what was dressed up as mission-shaped church was, more accurately, church-shaped mission.¹² Or to put it more bluntly, and harshly, and by someone who is more prone to benefit than most, our current expressions of mission may be driven more by our concern for the size of the pension pot for our clergy than it is by the gospel.

¹⁰ Here I draw on some of the insights of John Caputo. Caputo, J & Vattimo, G (2007) *After the Death of God*, Columbia University Press.

¹¹ Zachariah, G (2017) *Towards a Communion of the Multitude: Living God, Renew and Transform Us, Reformed World*, 67(1), p. 4.

¹² Hull, J (2015) *Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response*, SCM Press.

Economic survival and numerical growth appears to be what counts more than healing the sick and announcing good news to the poor.

Let me try to give you an illustration of this although it may be one that falls flat on its face if your emphasis is different. In the early chapters of Acts, we hear about the life of the early church. Two, from Acts 2 and Acts 4, are quoted particularly often.

“Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles and everyone was filled with awe. All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions and distribute their money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:43-47)¹³

“The group of believers was one in mind and heart. No-one said that any of his belongings was his own, but they all shared with one another everything they had. With great power, the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and God poured out rich blessings on them all. There was no-one in the group who was in need. Those who owned fields or houses would sell them, bring the money received from the sale and hand it over to the apostles; and the money was distributed to each one according to his need.” (Acts 4:32-35)¹⁴

¹³ Good News Bible (1976) Collins/Fontana

¹⁴ *ibid*

These are striking passages of a house-church movement where, as the community developed, they met in the courtyards of the Temple but most of the time they shared food, possessions and worship in one another's homes. The focus of virtually every sermon I have ever heard on these passages has been on growth rather than redistribution. And yet, I would want to suggest that it is the latter and not the former that lies at the heart of what is happening here, even for a relatively brief period.¹⁵ The primary focus appears to be on redistribution as opposed to growth. If growth happens it appears to be a product of sharing; what some economists might refer to as 'inclusive growth.' When the Church – locally, regionally and nationally – measures success (or impact) I would suggest it tends to focus on numerical growth as opposed to gospel depth. Mission seems to be counted in numbers and revenue as opposed to making the world look a bit more like God intended. Of course, it is very difficult to do other (and I speak as someone who in my current role sits at the centre of the institution) when membership is falling, and it is increasingly difficult to imagine the Church that we love surviving into future generations. But that, I think, is to miss the point – perhaps we are on the trajectory towards fragility. As George Zachariah, who I quoted above, puts it: "We have lost our ability to distinguish between the God of life and the ungoods of prosperity and power."¹⁶

Of course, in the present age, as has been true throughout the current of history, there are signs of a different way: a more humble, fragile path. Amongst these are: the Desert Mothers and Fathers; St Francis of Assisi; St Bartolome des Las Casas; Dorothy Day; and, Oscar Romero. Alongside these names known and

¹⁵ I was grateful for the insight, post lecture, from one of those who had attended that he believed that these passages needed to be read alongside Paul's description of the struggles of the church in Jerusalem.

¹⁶ Zachariah, G (2017) pp.8-9.

celebrated are thousands, millions, unknown but certainly at least as faithful in proclaiming the truth and good news of a fragile gospel in a fragile world.

With considerable trepidation I want to turn now to some of the signs of the fragile church which I have had the privilege of encountering through the years. In doing so, I need to share a little of the strategic decisions of the Church of Scotland over the last 20 years. In 2002 the Church of Scotland made a very deliberate decision; it's General Assembly received a report about the state of the church and indeed about the struggle against poverty in some of Scotland's economically poorest communities. It was an unusual report because it was substantially crafted by people living in some of the country's poorest areas – what the Church calls 'priority areas.' The report, *Holding the Hope – Sharing the Pain*,¹⁷ highlighted a precarious situation but also glimmers of something beautiful, fragile in the language that I am advocating. It called on the whole church to commit herself to the support of the church in the very poorest neighbourhoods stating: “priority for the poorest and most marginalised is the gospel imperative facing the whole Church not just the church in its poorest communities.”¹⁸ It warned that without significant and sustained investment the church within those neighbourhoods would simply disappear. The Church agreed and for the past 16 years the Church of Scotland has deliberately prioritised resources to these neighbourhoods and congregations. That meant a commitment to doubling staffing levels, investment in buildings and a deliberate infrastructure of support. I wish I could tell that this investment has resulted in massive numerical growth, but I can't. Most congregations continue to live hand to mouth but the very fact that the vast majority of them are still there, in their fragility, is a testimony to that commitment. As far as I know the Church of

¹⁷ Church of Scotland General Assembly, 2002

¹⁸ *ibid.*

Scotland is the only mainstream denomination in the rich world that has made such a deliberate priority for congregations living amongst those struggling against poverty. I have to be honest and say that I don't know how much longer that commitment will be maintained: the lack of success when measurements primarily reflect economic indicators makes it difficult to sustain in an environment where the 'Market as God'¹⁹ has substantially taken over significant elements of the church; and the perhaps inevitable shift of support from a relational to organisational model makes it more difficult to hear the story rather than the programme. Milton Schwantes, a Brazilian New Testament scholar, once told me that the Kingdom of God is like grass but the problem is that the Church always wants to plant trees.²⁰ By that I think that he meant that whilst the Church is always looking for something that will grow big, powerful and permanent, the gospel things that matter are often much closer to the ground. I am regularly struck by the fact that all Jesus' examples of the Kingdom of God (what I might prefer to describe as God's community of hope) are small, temporary and, yes, fragile.

Nonetheless, in this potentially temporary environment, there are glimmers of something different happening; the bubbling to the surface of a fragile church. Ann Morisy, who carried out an evaluation of the first seven years of the work in priority areas commented that the thing which struck her most acutely was the fact that people's circumstances might not have changed substantially in terms of economic indicators but a significant number of them had lost their sense of fear. If you know life in our fragile communities, you will know how significant that loss of fear is.

¹⁹ Cox, H (2016) *The Market as God*. Harvard University Press.

²⁰ Private conversation, 1979.

In 2011, Harvey Cox (author of *The Secular City*²¹ and one of the most prolific theologians of the 20th century) spent a few days with us, visiting some of our congregations and communities. Following his visit, he wrote a short, as far as I know, unpublished article entitled ‘The New Reformation’ reflecting on some of what he had encountered. I am going to quote what he wrote at length, partly because he says supremely well what I would like to say and partly because I am somewhat conflicted in saying it:

At the St. Francis Parish Hall of the local Catholic Church, Rev. Ian Galloway, a minister of the Church of Scotland, has organized a weekly open lunch to which asylum seekers, immigrants and anyone who simply needs a simple nourishing meal is invited. It is called “Bridging the Gap,” and I ate lunch there on a clear chilly day in September 2011. It was a memorable scene. It conjured glowing images of what the “Kingdom of God” should look like. Men in worn clothing and women with and without head scarves chatted amiably; children of all ages played with plastic wagons and hula hoops and raced around energetically; a pallet of skin colors dappled the hall. I was served a warm lunch, then sat by a genial gentleman who had emigrated from Lahore some years ago and was “a bit down on my luck.” A Muslim, he told me he was pleased especially by the inter-faith quality of the gatherings, and he came nearly every week. We talked easily even though the place was noisy, but it was a cheery kind of noise. There were a hundred people in the hall (aptly named for St. Francis, the friend of the poor and excluded), but this was not just a crowd. It was an emerging *koinonia*, a visible, vibrant demonstration for all to see – and taste and feel – of what

²¹Cox, H. (2013) *The Secular City: Secularization & Urbanization in Theological Perspective*. Princeton University Press.

Karl Barth once described the role of the church to be: “a living demonstration of God’s intention for all humanity.”

The following day I visited a parish whose young minister has taken the bold step of opening the aging building to serve, among others, ex-inmates, addicts and the unemployed. I met and spoke with some of these guests as they sipped tea in a hospitable if somewhat scruffy room. One man in a tattered sweater told me enthusiastically about the programs the church sponsors for people with a variety of needs. The only poignant aspect of my visit came when I talked with the young minister who was discouraged that his small Sunday congregation did not seem to appreciate what he was doing with the building during the week. Could it be that those congregants had become so accustomed to judging the “success” of a minister by the number of people who fill the pews on Sunday that they had forgotten what Jesus meant when he said, “Come to me all you are heavy laden,” and “the least of these my brethren”?

This, I think, moves us firmly in the direction of what it means to be a fragile church and his final sentence, about the young minister who finds himself so deeply conflicted, illustrates how hard this stuff is. Such a church – where, for example, Muslims and Christians and atheists sit down and eat together and where Kin-dom activity does not lead to numerical growth on a Sunday or to economic survival – feels inevitably like a scandal to many. I see this fragile church breaking out all over the place, sometimes in environments that we might have traditionally called church but often in entirely new spaces. I am sure that you can think of similar encounters. I read about it in, for example, in Sara Miles wonderful trilogy of books *Jesus Freak*,²² *Take This Bread*,²³ and *City of*

²² Miles, S. (2012). *Jesus Freak: Feeding – Healing – Raising the Dead*. Canterbury Press

²³ Miles, S. (2012) *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*. Canterbury Press.

God.²⁴ In *Take This Bread* she gives an account of entering St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco and receiving bread and wine as an unbeliever in a way that turned her life upside down and which also turned the communion table in that church building into a food pantry at which all are fed. In *City of God*, she writes of offering ashes on the street of her neighbourhood at the start of Lent to anyone who wanted to receive them. I think that this deliberate rubbing out of the boundaries between what we might think of as religious and secular space is one of the marks of what it means to be a fragile church – it means that the boundaries are more porous, and the barriers don't really exist.

Last week, Ian Fraser died at the age of 100. He was the last surviving founder member of the Iona Community. For a number of years, whilst working with the World Council of Churches, Ian travelled extensively, visiting what had become known as base ecclesial communities (or Basic Christian Communities) in Latin America as well as in Europe and other parts of the world. His records of these visits introduced me to a new ecclesiology and they were my first glimpses of what a fragile church might look like in practice. These communities are not just the most local expression of the church; they are church. They are also not just communities of worship and fellowship; they are places of justice-building and transformation. I think that it is worth noting that base communities, even at their height in Brazil, only every involved a tiny percentage of the overall population. But in a real sense, even now that they have been significantly overtaken by the rise of neo-Pentecostalism, they represent in the words of Leonardo Boff a 'reinvention of the church.'²⁵

My particular passion is about how we might move towards a 'Church of the Poor' to use Pope Francis' celebrated phrase. But I think that the language of

²⁴ Miles, S. (2014). *City of God: Faith in the Streets*. Canterbury Press.

²⁵ Boff, L. (1986) *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*. Orbis Books.

fragility has the potential to speak to all who see themselves (ourselves) at the margins. Society has had enough of politicians, brand specialists, advertisers whose promises are hollow because they offer a future which we know does not add up. We are fragile people, living in fragile communities, on a fragile planet. This is truth. But this is also true: God has chosen fragility and it is high time that the Church did the same. To quote from Harvey Cox again:

What should the larger church *be* and *do* and *say* in our era of increasing inequality, religious diversity and economic stalemate? For years the Protestant churches, especially those in the Calvinist tradition, have usually *said* the right thing. The Gospel has been faithfully proclaimed. That is something the church must continue to do, and with vigor and imagination. But sometimes the other prongs of mission have been neglected or underdeveloped. Now, in many parts of the world, a healthy balance is being restored. In Latin America, the “base communities” became living cells in which poor people demonstrated and pursued the Gospel of justice. In the cities of Europe and America, ministers and lay people are looking for ways to contribute to forging a society in which adherents of a congeries of religious traditions can live together and learn from each other. Surveys in the United States indicate that what people are looking for in a local church is a supportive community where they can be honest about their doubts and reservations as they continue their spiritual quests.

I began with a story; let me end with one. Twenty years ago, I had the privilege of spending three months in south east Brazil, meeting with and interviewing people from across the Church. My regular question was what the church in my part of the world might learn from the church in that part of the world.

One afternoon, I sat in the shack of a woman and her five children in a favela where about 300,000 people dug out a meagre existence. Their home was made of cardboard and wood; the stench of the open sewer that ran past her door in the burning heat was over-powering. On wet days it flowed under the door. I sat on the only chair and drank from the only cup. What, I asked, might the Church in her part of the world offer the church in mine. Quickly, without hesitation, she responded. ‘We can offer you hope.’

I must have looked confused. Hope? In the midst of this? She saw my confusion, smiled gently, and then said: “Martin, you are confusing hope with optimism. For here there are no grounds for optimism for here people die every day. But still there are grounds for hope for hope is a gift from God.”

That is precarious. That is precious. That is gospel. That is fragile. Thank you for your attention. As I said at the outset these remain provisional musings and I look forward to your reflections and to learning from you.