

The Fifth Donald Barnes Memorial Lecture, 22nd November 2017

St Peter's Church, Belsize Square, NW3 4HJ

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Three years after Donald Barnes was ordained a priest, Henry Montgomery Campbell was installed as the Bishop of London. He was known, amongst other things, for his dry humour. He also tried his hand at poetry. In fact he wrote a poem in his will and asked that it be read out to all of his clergy on his death. It simply said:

'Tell my priests when I am gone, o'er me to shed no tears; for I shall be no deader then, than they have been for years'.

Well, all I can say is that the bishop obviously hadn't met Donald Barnes when he scribbled his verse down. This is a huge honour to be here, speaking in memory and with heartfelt gratitude for Donald and his ministry and for being alongside Sally and so many members of their big family of friends and campaigners and parishioners from over the years. I am very grateful to be asked to be here.

I first met Donald in 1996. I can remember it very vividly. I had just been made the Chaplain to the then new Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, and I think he wanted to know whether I had the same views as the bishop on various things. I could see that twinkle in the eye as he tried to work out what sort of Bishop's chaplain I would be – a Mr Slope unctuously repeating his Master's voice? Or maybe a retiring lady-in-waiting figure, always ready with the necessaries to hand? Or perhaps an Alastair Campbell type, there to interpret my boss to the public for a more general consumption? I told him a friend of mine had once said to me that he thought I had been called Mark because I often overstep it. Donald laughed very loudly and I think I must have passed my exam in some way because he later went up to the Bishop and said:

'Seems a good man you've got there. I hope you're good at fencing!'

That first conversation of ours all took place next to the font in the cathedral. I often think of Donald as I pass by. And as I think about it, it always seems the right place to remember him – the place of baptism. Because when Jesus was pushed down into the water by his cousin all the voices on the shore – the gossip, the opinions, the chatter – those voices were all drowned out and he would only have heard one thing under the water for that moment – his heart, beating. He then came up and took a deep breath of fresh air and then, we are told, he heard the one voice that mattered. It was from heaven, saying 'It's you. I love you'. Then came the business of Jesus going into the desert where he had now to learn how to live up to that voice that mattered and not live down to all the other voices shouting at him, including Satan who endlessly quoted the Bible at him. When he had learned how to live up to that voice of love by living a life, as it said of George Herbert, in tune with heaven's humility, Jesus was able to begin his ministry.

Donald was someone I looked up to in the ensuing years I knew him, as being someone who always tried to tune in to the voice that mattered. He was someone able to distil the essential from all the nonsense, someone who was able to see the reckless love of God has consequences for anyone who dares to say they believe in that God and that it shames any church that takes small opportunities to be mean instead of large opportunities to be generous.

And to stay personal for a moment if I may, as I look back to those days when I had just finished my curacy in the mid 90's I think of a wonderful number, Donald amongst them, of Anglican pastors and writers who helped me, in those formative years, to take seriously the voice that matters in a complex world and in fragile hearts. I hope it isn't too indulgent to name a few of them. I'm thinking of Harry Williams, awkward and sometimes imperious, but the one who most taught me that just because a Church talks a lot about truth doesn't mean it is good at honesty and that we can all be very skilled at hiding ourselves behind our projections and pieties. I'm thinking of Eric James who showed me that preaching isn't a script, it's an event and can help us re-imagine the world. I'm thinking of Leslie Houlden who taught me that you take the Bible seriously by studying it with all your questions and letting it question all your answers.

I'm thinking too of Michael Mayne, who understood that God is the world as poetry is in the poem; of Monica Furlong who first showed me the Church from a woman's eyes and heart and told me then when I write I shouldn't hide behind others' thoughts and quotes but bring myself onto the page; of Ken Leech who hammered home into me that Christian spirituality is the business of learning to speak up for others and that Christians will always find compassion easier than justice but that it's not good enough, that a church not of the poor is a poor and scandalous thing; of Jim Cotter who bravely held a brave and honest light of hope for LGBT Christians in some very dark days whose shadows of course still cast themselves over us. I'm thinking of Bill Vanstone who knew that love must always be the last word for the one who takes the name of Christ and whatever else it is, the Church ought to be a school for relating – to God, to one another, to yourself. And Donald showed me that all these things could be lived in a ministry amongst people's lives, that theology is what happens on the way to the pulpit, on the way to the hospital bed; that theology is not a sport, it is survival.

These people, and I could go on, were those who helped me understand that it is possible to try and think critically and to live faithfully, to be unafraid to reason and unashamed to adore. These are the ones who knew in their hearts that fundamentalism is to Christianity what paint by numbers is to art. At times they were prophets, looking into the future and reporting back to us all. They wanted a church less concerned about being right than about being loving. Orthodoxy for them was less about having certain beliefs but about believing in a certain way, with integrity, honesty, questions, a love of the tradition and the call to be fresh. They were also the ones who knew the truth of Ludvig Holberg that 'if you learn theology before you learn how to be a human being you might never become a human being'. These were good, flawed people, full of longing for God, full of God's longing for us, but as I list them, how it all seems so long ago! How different does the Church feel today in so many ways!

My purpose tonight is not to have a go at the present tone of much of the institutional Church of England. It's a cheap sport and not very satisfying at the end of the day. I'm not wanting, either, to get all nostalgic and saying 'wasn't it all wonderful back then?' I don't want to be like the character in the Good Show who always knew what time it was because someone had once written it down for him on a piece of paper. No. All I want to do is to remind ourselves that theology is always hoeing, raking over the soil, to ensure that good things come to the top and don't get forgotten. So I offer nothing original tonight – I've never been able to do that anyway – I just want to bring to the top again a couple of things theologically and pastorally that I think have become a bit buried under the rather anxious soil of the present Church and I do this here because I think they are things that were very much in Donald's soul and things we lose at our peril.

The former dean of St Paul's, the poet and preacher John Donne said that the effectiveness of a preacher was not their wit or their cleverness or their authority. The effectiveness of a preacher lay, he said, in their 'nearness', how near, how close, they felt to those who were listening. Was this a human being just like them? And this leads me to the first thing I want to say, and to say it as we honour a man who served as a parish priest for sixty years, that there is a non-negotiable need for Christian communities to be near people in their lives, in their losses and celebrations, their devotion and dereliction, their reverence and their rebellion. This nearness to the human is the only key to speaking or engaging in any public forum or in any private life. This means, I believe, always striving for resonance instead of relevance, not playing around with the passing distractions of now but addressing, and if not always with certainty then always with a confidence, those things that are for always within the human, the things from which we can never retreat.

The poet RS Thomas once said that a poem is that which makes its way to the intellect via the heart. It seems to me a good reminder that all resonant communication does the same. It is the parish clergy and the chaplains and those who work as pastors that remind the church leaders and bodies never to forget it. Any engagement of the church in the public square is bound to fail unless it learns from them the truth that sets us free – that every life is worth listening to and that if you listen carefully you will often discover, hopefully with them, the love that lies between the lines. Parish clergy and those in a pastoral ministry lift up a life like a shell on the beach to see what you can hear together. You hear hurt and tears, astonishment, pain, bravery, avoidance, strength, faith and confusion. But you have picked that shell up, assuring people that because of that voice, we are worth more than the worse thing we have ever done, and no matter how they are feeling as pastors, how discouraged in their ministry, how dejected, exhausted, empty, disillusioned with the Church, themselves, their own sense of failing – however frazzled it all feels, the pastors are the beginning of hope because that 'nearness' is where hope always begins. Pastors go into the public square, not first saying how difficult it all is for the organisation, but by saying how truthful they must be to those they know and love and live among.

I have responsibility at St Paul's for our visual art programme. The greatness of art often lies in the fact that although we can't always understand it, we sense that somehow it understands us. We saw this very much by placing the life size *Ecce Homo* by Mark Wallinger in Holy Week outside St

Paul's at the top of our steps. Exposed, brave, in pain, judged, full of a dignity that seemed to have a source beyond – looking at him there it all felt like us somewhere deep inside. What if people were able to say of Christian engagement in the public square, 'well, I don't understand it all but, yes, I think this might understand me quite well'? Reaching the intellect by way of the heart, not, as so many seem to want to do – just adding insight to injury. The Church needs the pastors, and therefore a theology of experience, so badly at the moment to recall us back to the heart of how to connect to people. Ambassadors of God's nearness.

And that leads me to the other thing I want to say. The other thing pastors and parish clergy know very well is how important words are, of finding the right ones, of knowing what they can contain and hide us from, of knowing when to let the eloquence of silence have its say too. The right word at the right time can help someone's full-stop change into a comma. The enemy of true relationship is a too easy fluency, cliché, words that have been learned but never felt.

I'm from Shropshire originally and there are a lot of sheep in Shropshire and at the back of my grandmother's house I often see Tom who's a shepherd. And about three years ago I saw him in the field carrying a real shepherd's crook. So I joked with him that my boss the bishop had one of those too. And I asked him if he really used it to reach out and hook naughty sheep with and haul them in. No, he said. The best use for this is to stick in down firmly into the ground so that I can hold on to it so tight that I become still enough that the sheep learn to trust me.

I've always wanted to be asked to preach at a bishop's consecration with that story but of course it applies to you and to me just as much. If we are called to the remarkable vocation of listening to lives, to discernment of where best a life can graze, then we have to be trustworthy – spiritually, humanly, honestly. Somehow, and my God it's hard, we have to be rooted enough in God just enough to be authentic and trustworthy. We fear God not because God is fierce and out to get us but because God is real and we aren't always. Our masks quickly eat into our faces, especially that pastoral mask we need to protect ourselves with often. But there needs to be enough that is not false, enough of a relationship with God in place, for us to be of genuine worth for those who place their future alongside us and ask for help in holding their compass. I have a feeling that Donald, and the group of pastors I mentioned earlier, if they were around today would say to the church leaders: 'Growth? Ok. But depth first, and the spiritual growth of the human and humane. Reform? Ok. With love and justice as the criteria before caution and compromise coupled with the instinct to preserve things that have already died. Renewal? Yes. A renewal of the sense of God's mystery, our fragility and limitations, of God's ministry and not my ministry, a renewal that searches for a language that resonates and isn't full of tired clichés – a renewal of imagination, to have enough to imagine what it might be like to be someone other than me.

Let's stay with words for a moment. This is not an easy time for words. It's said that the political current in the USA at the moment can be summed up as: if you're not at the table, you are probably on the menu. Certainly one of the very evident things about the current administration is its use of language. Trump campaigned in graffiti and now governs in tweets. With excited talk of 'fake news' we rather get distracted, it is hoped, from fake politicians or populist slogans, generalisations that

smooth over, at best, complexity, at worst, the truth. This is not new of course, it's just particularly bad at the moment - and such abuse spreads across our globe very quickly. It leads to confusion in society about what we believe, what we want and what is possible. Consumerism makes words seductive not truthful, technology gives us too many words, our care for them decreasing as they proliferate. The first one to draw a breath is declared the listener. George Steiner argues, of course, that we are living in the aftermath of the broken covenant between the word and the world. And the same ears that listen to politicians, salespeople and news commentators are listening to the Christian. What sort of language will be trustworthy? And why does it seem that so often the voice of the Church is a choice between ignorance on fire, or intelligence on ice? The likes of Donald Barnes wanted a passionate and fun commitment to a faith unafraid to stand for something rather than fall for anything, so that means being political and courageous at times, but also passionate that certainty is faith's enemy, not doubt, because with God and with us all things are as yet unfinished and there are things yet to be told us by the Spirit that we cannot always bear now. God always changes full stops into commas.

All professions can be blighted by cold or lumpy language that feels a long way from who we really are, a language on best behaviour but not at its best, a clinical language. The Church is always in danger of such deadening jargon that means little to the uninitiated. Just think of the acronyms for a start. In my journey in the Church I have been on a PCC, seen the ADO and the DDO, been on an ACCM, later known as an ABM and now called a BAP, all part of MinDiv. I then went to POT, which should not be confused with a PTO, and later got a small grant from CME which enabled me to go to SPCK and buy a book to help me apply to the DAC. Now I work at a cathedral I attend endless FACs and when stuck apply to the CFCE. You will now understand why the Board for Unity and Mission quickly had to change its notepaper. You will also understand why when you try and explain large parts of Church life to the enquirer they look at you with a polite smile and a blank stare. I was just raising a smile but my point is that language is like water, if it isn't moving it is stagnant. If it isn't near, it isn't alive with me.

This isn't a modern problem. I used to live in Denmark and consequently spent a bit of time getting to know the work of Kierkegaard. You will know that he was very critical of the preachers of his day. In one of his parables, Kierkegaard imagines a church of geese gathering every Sunday to hear a sermon preached from a high pulpit, where an Old Gander exhorts the congregation that the Creator intended a greater purpose for them. He proclaims that they are strangers there, and that their wings were so designed that they might fly to distant lands. Every Sunday the geese would hear the sermon and waddle home, before returning the following Sunday for the same lofty speech about the use of their wings. Whenever one of them asked why no one actually flew anywhere, various geese responded with nuanced arguments about the dangers of what happens to those who actually attempt it, pointing to those who are suffering and thin among them:

'There, you see what it leads to when flying is taken seriously!'

they say. They point to those who are plump and delicate among the congregation as those having the grace of God. The following Sunday the Old Gander returns to the pulpit and again preaches

about this 'greater purpose' the Creator has for them – and their wings - and the cycle of inactivity continues. Kierkegaard's attack is on sermons that lead to nothing and is consequently aimed more at the preacher than at sermons. He writes:

'The trouble is not that Christianity is not voiced... but that it is voiced in such a way that the majority eventually think it utterly inconsequential... Thus the highest and the holiest things make no impact whatsoever, but they are given sound and are listened to as something that now, God knows why, has become routine and habit like so much else'.

This quiet sense of let down that churchgoers have from this state of affairs he believed should be challenged by sermons that made the Bible stories unfamiliar again. There used to be an actor called Alec McCowan who learned the entire Gospel of Mark and performed it in theatres. It was great but I've never forgotten how strange it was to break off for a choc ice after the Transfiguration. He made the Gospel unfamiliar just like David Suchet in St Paul's this Lent when he read it in one go. And any language of God that sinks like porridge is a scandal. We must have a realistic self-scrutiny about the language that we fall into, often unconsciously, and about where that language comes from, where it goes, what it does. Words become flesh.

I suppose what I am trying to say is that talk of God and of faith is so often at the moment polarised, beaten into crass characterisations and then fired like bullets. This leads to a lot of bumper sticker theology, soundbites on God that we're meant to honk at if we agree or just drive by if we don't. This simmers down the mystery of God, a mystery that I believe very strongly is not to be resolved but deepened by what we say. To this end, literalism is a curse. It is as flat and shallow as it is falsely self-confident. As Pdraig o'Tuama said to me,

'Whatever the death of Jesus Christ means, you shouldn't be able to put it on a fridge magnet'.

In the life of faith what we long for most, eludes us. God is like R.S. Thomas' rabbit who you try and grab but he has gone, but it is still warm where he has been:

'Such a fast God, always before us and leaving as we arrive'.

It couldn't be any other way because as I say it is desire that is the heartbeat of our relationship with God. Faith nourishes us by the hunger it creates. And faith intensifies rather than satisfies our longing for God. As sacramental Christians we know that faith endlessly searches for the depths beyond the surface of things. Ironically, the Eucharist is the food that makes us more hungry for communion. As Christians we must always be wary of first impressions. And that is why I continue to believe that the Church needs more poetry today, or, should I say, we need to reclaim the poetry of our faith.

For me one of the most important of these is poetry, that logic defying crafting of words that throws open expansive fields of discernment and, perception and like belief, satisfies by the longing it initiates. Poetry is in a constant process of becoming, the final meaning is never there. Is this why Heaney refers to it as the redress of poetry? Perhaps that is what I am arguing for theologically. It feels like a soul-language and so, when Michael Longley was asked where all his poetry came from,

he said if he knew where poems came from he'd go and live there. Arriving at the intellect via the heart, poetry resists closure, resists paraphrase, defies summary. As has been said, a poem is never finished, only ever abandoned. This constant process of becoming resembles the life of the soul in relationship and conversation with God: never finished, never closed, always stretching our contours into fresh wisdom and being.

Theology should be poetry. Prayers should be poetry. Christian faith and living should be poetry in motion. Liturgy should be performance poetry. Christians in all senses of this phrase believe in poetry. Language is sacramental. You only need to go to a Mass as we just have to see that every which way we look poetry is coming at us, hymns, psalms, collects, Eucharistic prayers, biblical readings, anthems – all meaning communicating through imprecision and pregnant ambiguity in an imaginative interplay.

So the poetic comes to us from every side. The problem is that we don't always have a poetically receptive mind to allow that poetry to expand us rather than worry us with the factual questions of the rational materialist. We make a category error if we confuse *'mythos'* for *'logos'* but it is hard not to have gone native. But every child knows that if I say 'here is the news', it needs to be heard differently from 'once upon a time'. Or if I pick up an Ikea instruction paper to make a cupboard, I will approach it differently from Eliot's *Wasteland*. How do you hear when you're in church? How do you think you should be hearing? How do people tune to you as you sit with them?

If our language becomes shallow so will our discipleship and there will be poverty in the lives of those that see the world in prose only. A faith that initiates that state of affairs will be equally prosaic, reducing God to yet another object in our self-justifying narratives that place cold rationality centre stage without the more illuminating second, third and fourth thoughts and journeys that begin when poetry begins its work, the allusions, overtones, signposts all asking us to breathe a bit differently. Wallace Stevens said that we ought to like poetry the way children like snow. Poetry uses the same bricks as prose but builds a very different house. I once heard an Australian newscaster say:

'aah, poetry's for poofs. What's the point of it? It isn't true and it's difficult to read'.

Well, it was another Australian, the poet Les Murray prayed,

'God, at the end of prose, somehow be our poem'.

Poetry is crafted to pursue truth and its difficulty is the point, its difficulty is what makes it authentic, its resistance to paraphrase is its integrity.

For God to become our poem will be for God to be recognised as elusive but beautiful, distant but somehow reassuring. To pray to this God will be difficult but also a homecoming. How could it be otherwise because as Murray says elsewhere in a poem,

'God is in this world as poetry is in the poem'.

So we have a Jesus who preaches imaginatively and poetically and whose words were not cheapened by systematic precision or cliché. His so often is a language of intimation rather than explanation, a language that refers before it defines. It somehow reflects the reality of our relationship with God that both knows concealment as well as illumination. After all it's sort of the case that we know there's a God because he keeps disappearing. You'll remember that Meister Eckhart said that God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding in the dark and so gives himself away. God gives us just enough to seek him but never enough to fully find him and the language and preaching of Jesus similarly teaches with an openness that has potential to transform on so many levels, as indeed are the Gospel accounts themselves, poetically crafted for maximum effect. In other words, God's gift to us is being but our gift to him is becoming. Jesus' preaching is full of potential not arrival, it invites rather than contains. And those of us who preach or regularly try and express our faith shouldn't feel apologetic if we do the same even when there is great demand on us to do otherwise. Such an approach also says something about God maybe? God is infinitely resourceful not infinitely in control. God is to be shared before he's understood.

Because desire, transformation, longing lie at the heart of faith we constantly think that other people are doing it better than we are. I remember interviewing a woman for ordination training and asking her why she wanted to be a priest.

'I suppose I want to help people have that relationship with God that I only wish I had myself.'

she answered. Well, she got through as that seemed pretty spot on.

Let me draw to a close. A poetic theology of experience - theology of this sort won't be neat or comfortable but neither is the life with or under God of which it attempts to speak. We are not to possess the truth but to serve it. We are not here to resolve the mystery of God but to deepen it. We are not to reflect jargon and cliché - the devil is in the drivel when *logos* has turned to slogan - but to draw from the fountain of poetry and the faith words that feel strange but something like home.

A final postscript. When George Herbert at the end of his life put together his poems in order for his friend to look at, he placed the poem 'Love' right at the end. Love had to be the final word for a pastor poet. This is the other thing I thank Donald and my Anglican forbears for - for reminding the church that, at the end, we will be judged on our love. We do not follow a Lord who said:

'By their beliefs you shall know them'.

Or

'Behold, a new systematic theology I give unto you'.

Paul never said

'Though I speak in the tongues of men and angels but have not the right theory of atonement I am a noisy gong'.

James did not remind us that

'True religion is this: to use Common Worship for every service'.

Our vocation is not about giving information at the end of the day but helping formation, growth, of helping people's lives shape around their commitments and loves, including, we pray, God's magnetic mystery. I wonder if you know the Austrian poet Erich Fried's poem?

I've been a bit personal tonight so let me end with a personal story. I was brought up by my grandparents. As a boy I knew my grandfather had flown in the Royal Air Force in World War II and he was a bit of a hero to me but he never spoke about his experiences, except one day mentioning 'Dresden' and weeping. He has since died but two years ago I was asked to preach in the reconstructed Frauenkirche in Dresden. He was very much in my mind. On the way to the train station at the end of my visit the taxi driver asked me why I was in Dresden and I told him I had always wanted to come.

'Why?'

he asked. I took a deep breath.

'Because my grandfather was a navigator of a Lancaster bomber and on 14 Feb 1945 I know he flew here as part of the bombing raid and he could never talk about it'.

The man was quiet and then said:

'Ah, that was the night my mother was killed'.

He pulled over the car and turned the engine off. He then turned round to me, put out his arm towards me and said:

'And now we shake hands'.

As I went home I thought of that Love poem by George Herbert:

Love took my hand and smiling did reply.

That man, like me, knew the facts. He knew the horrors of that night, he had lived his loss, learned about the thousands dead. But he knew more. He had become wise. He knew how to make a full stop into a comma, how to interrupt revenge into something more true. He taught me the Christian question that the Church's pastors have always known more than any other: not how can I just be loyal to the past but how can I be loyal to the future? He pulled over the car, turned the noise down, listened and reached out to me. Whatever happens in my life, whatever way it goes or doesn't go the way I want, my journey will always be different because what he did was show me what hope looks like. I like to think that if he wasn't a taxi driver he might just have been a Christian.

How can we together be loyal to the future is the ultimate Christian question. It is the question that I know lived in Donald's soul. And when the Church got too annoying and bishops were too frustrating, when he was looked at as a 'liberal', a 'radical', someone not 'sound' he knew that the wisdom of the pastor and the wisdom of the poet will always be there, distilling out the things that matter. He was relentlessly positive and generous, kind, to those with whom he deeply disagreed. But Donald was asked once if he ever felt like quitting, handing in his resignation to the bishop and archdeacon because it was just too awful in the institution of the Church sometimes. His answer?

'Oh, I often threaten them to stay, not to go'.

Like Martin Luther King, he never said:

'I have a nightmare'

but he had a dream, an intimation, of a kingdom where love takes our hands smiling and that while we are on this earth we should try with every bit of energy we have to do the same.

Thank you, Donald Barnes.