HOBART LECTURE
by
The Most Rev. Dr. Rowan Williams
Archbishop of Canterbury
at
Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York
on
September 12, 2001

I've decided that I don't want to speak from my prepared text today. I just suspect that today there are quite a number of other things on our minds. And I want to suggest some ways of reflecting on the experience of the last two days, which might perhaps touch the heart of what we mean by pastoral theology and pastoral reality.

It's a great presumption from someone coming from outside to comment on what's happening here, and my only excuse for that is, I suppose, the experience of being a couple of hundred yards away from events yesterday morning, in Trinity, and so having quite fresh in my mind, as do others here, the experience of wondering whether they are actually going to die in the next half hour.

It was Plato who said that philosophy was about learning how to die, and many people have said that theology has something to do with that as well. In a sense, what I want to try to do today is reflect on theology as a learning about death, and also death as a teacher of theology.

Years ago, a very great friend of mine used to speak about the most important insights in Christian thinking derived from what he called the death cell writers. Dietrich Bonhoeffe and many others write in awareness of approaching death. And I suppose, too, that I have learning something of this by reading, for example, many of the novels of Iris Murdoch, God rest her, who was much preoccupied with what it is like to die.

It seems to me that when we are faced with a real, concrete possibility that death is going to happen to us, we immediately have one of the deepest possible challenges posed to the way in which we think about ourselves. We're brought up against a situation in which we have no ability at all to change the future. So often we as humans construct our sense of freedom and worth around our capacity to change the future. What happens when we cannot? When you and I are frustrated, the temptation is to try to do something, which, while it won't or might not let us change the circumstances, at least makes us feel better. A great deal of the life of the church, not to mention international relations, is based on this principle, as you may have noticed. But if the powerlessness is real, and if you're prepared to look it in the face, what happens?

Our Buddhist friends tell us that when we've learned to let go of the craving to leave our thumbprint on the wall, what is left is compassion. Because when we are released from the urge to leave that thumbprint, to scribble that signature on the wall, the urge to act so as to seem to be making a difference, one thing that happens is that a space is created. A space that is otherwise occupied by anxiety and becomes vacant space into which someone else's reality may come.

I want to suggest that ultimately all authentic pastoral activity has to be activity in the face of death. All authentic pastoralness is activity in which with God's grace somehow or other a space is made, a breach in the wall of our anxiety and our urgent longing to get on top of things. When

that breach is made, and there is room, death teaches us. If we can't control the future, we can't impose the pattern that we like upon it, what is there to do? We can rage or we can laugh, since that is the choice that death puts before us.

Over the summer I reread one of Iris Murdoch's novels, *Bruno's Dream*. It's about a very old man dying slowly and, as he dies, reflecting on all those people who he has given cause not to like him: the wife to whom he has been unfaithful, the son who he cast off when the son married a nonwhite woman and a number of other people injured by him. He was afraid to go and say goodbye to his wife when she was dying because he was convinced that she would have cursed him as she died – as she had good reason to. And it is only at the very end of the book, as he himself enters his last phase, that he knows with absolute certainty that in the face of death you can't curse. That's not a general principle but a discovery, the discovery of the space death makes and the theology death teaches.

Arising out of this is a further feature of what death teaches, which we might want to think about: something to do with self-doubt. Faced with real threat and physical threat, the possible dissolution of what you are, the pain that you may not have the skills to deal with you can no longer imagine that you're protected. Suddenly you've joined the vast majority of human beings living or dead for human dignity is not a matter of living only, but living with courage and generosity from one day to the next. Those of us in the United Kingdom and in North America who are used to living lives that are not usually thought of like that, may have cause to give thanks, strange as it may sound, for an experience that puts them a little, just for a moment, in touch with the experience of most humans. And if that's indeed true, as death teaches solidarity, death teaches humility.

Yesterday morning, one of my thoughts – one of the more repeatable and edifying thoughts -- was this is what it's like in Jerusalem, this is what it was like in Baghdad, and this is a bit what was like in London or Swansea or Southampton in the 40s. My parents lived through the German bombing of that time, and they talked of that experience. It's another time, you see, of making room, making space. The landscape of the world suddenly turns out to be only a rather small, illuminated part of a very large landscape indeed, most of which is not picturesque, most of which does not contain well laid gardens and features of interest.

An encounter with death in the sense of fate puts us radically in touch with people whose experience is generally unlike our own. I thought of that again as I listened a little while ago to the Epistle at mass, to those remarkable words about how the cross of Christ brings near those who are far. The distance in question is first of all, of course, distance from God, but that is also, necessarily, distance from each other. Scripture is definitely clear that to be drawn near to God is always to be drawn near to each other, and there is no way of separating those two.

Across the torment and violence upon which the whole history of the world turns God makes strangers neighbors. We know that when we do face catastrophe in life, how we are drawn together by it. I think we were aware of it yesterday morning. We're aware of it as we see rescue services moving into operation, and see the selfless courage and skill that goes into that work. We know at some point that tragedy does build bridges. And the immense challenge of pastoral work, and perhaps the challenge of the Christian fellowship itself, is to make known that avenue of discovery. What we discover – selfish, lazy people that we are – in moments of extremity, we somehow must make normal, predictable and natural: looking to the other, feeling

for the other, making room for the other, which takes over some mysterious people so remarkably in moments of threat and difficulty, all these have to become usual.

We laugh these days very often at the way in which earlier Christian generations taught people to think about "Live each day as if it's thy last" we think a terrible gloomy and negative statement. If all this is true, living with death before their eyes, consciousness of mortality is in fact a shock. "To love that well which thou must leave ere long" said Shakespeare. Also there's a wonderful Buddhist story that speaks of such love. A man is running away from a tiger and comes to the edge of a cliff and scrambles over the edge, hanging precariously onto a root. As he hangs there, the tiger growling above him, a deep cliff below him and a rocky river, he sees two small mice begin to gnaw on the root by which he's holding on. As he hangs there, he sees a small flower in the crevice behind the root. And he says, "That's beautiful." Buddhists would say that's the moment he's enlightened. That's the moment where space is made in the face of death.

These discoveries obviously have something to do with a third area, which relates a little bit to what I was going to talk about, a general discourse on vulnerability in the pastoral office, in pastoral work. Another of my thoughts yesterday was that vulnerability never hits you or bites where you thought it was going to. When you think about it, that is so blindingly obvious that it ought not to be said. If I were able to say, well, of course, I can be vulnerable to x, y and z, then I wouldn't be vulnerable to x, y and z because I wouldn't even be surprised by it. In all sorts of ways, we discover what vulnerability really is when the kinds of vulnerability we haven't budgeted for arrive. We may think that we're good at dealing with crises. We love the extraordinary. We may think that that is vulnerability, being compassionately insightfully responsive to crises. And we may have to discover that our real vulnerability is somewhere else.

We may think as we begin the pastoral priestly ministry, that we know ourselves and we know what we're vulnerable to, and the reality and words are different things entirely. And I found, being confessional for a moment, that one of the really difficult things in being a bishop is that some of the things I thought I was good at I discovered I'm bad at. And some of the circumstances where I thought I would be able to rise to challenges in crises have been the source of my greatest failures. So again, we're brought up against this very, very alarming insight—the future we're not in charge of. And facing the real vulnerability that's involved there is a task which in a way we can never perform for ourselves and never do in the abstract. Life will do it for us. The philosopher Wittgenstein, that rather paradoxical religious hero of the twentieth century, said that as far as he was concerned, you couldn't earn faith from any ideas or images. You could only be taught it by suffering.

But there is one other area I want to reflect on in relation to an area where we've all been concerned, where people will be asking us and challenging us quite a lot. Suffering humiliates us and we want to make a difference. We want it to be otherwise. And as I mentioned earlier, one of the ways in which we try to make it otherwise is to do something which may not resolve the situation, but releases our tensions. I'm sure that in the city and the country in the days ahead, the pressure to do something, anything, is going to be greater and greater. The rhetoric will become more and more intense. There are two things that I want to say to that. One is a very simple personal observation which I found coming out this morning when I was asked about this by a journalist from the United Kingdom. Quite simply: I wouldn't want that to happen to anybody. And sometimes those very elementary Ethics 101 responses are the important ones. I wouldn't want that to happen to anyone. I wouldn't want to see another room

of preschool children being hurried out of a building, under threat. I wouldn't want to see thousands of corpses given over for the justification of some principle. And very simply: I don't want anybody to feel what others and I were feeling at about 10:30 yesterday morning. I've been there."

But there's a slightly less personal or basic response which we might wish to consider. And that's to do with language. I live in a bilingual culture and one of the difficulties that I sometimes face is what language to process something in. On the telephone this morning, one of the journalists from the UK contacted me and said "hello" with an intonation that told me immediately he was going to speak Welsh to me, and so I replied in Welsh. "This is the language we're going to speak." By doing so, I was saying, "This is the language in which we're going to make sense to one another. This is how we go on." I'm agreeing that it's all right to speak Welsh. And I say in my most flawless Oxford English, "Good morning," I say, we don't speak Welsh, this is not how we go on.

Now when indiscriminate violence is met with indiscriminate violence, it's a transaction in language. I'm saying, "This is how we go on. This is how we make sense. These are the terms on which we are agreeing to be together." I understand this language and I'm fairly comfortable with it. So if the first word spoken is an indiscriminate slaughter, if the first word spoken is the sad but inevitable cost to the innocent and I reply in that language, I'm saying this is how we go on. This is our currency. Again and again, in human transactions at every level, personal, communal, interracial, intergender, international, the question of what language we are going to speak together is one of the most important moral issues that we have. Do we want the conversation to continue and in what terms? And when there is pressure for the release of tension for retaliation, that is perhaps one of the moral questions a Christian might want to address. How do we talk, how do we make sense?

This hasn't been much of a formal lecture, but I didn't think that a formal lecture was necessarily what you and I were likely to feel like today. It did seem to me that there were things quite near to the topic on all our minds which we ought to try and reflect on a little bit theologically. Because in all this, in trying to understand pastoral work as something death teaches, we're saying, aren't we, that in the Christian community, the taking up of risk by everyone for the sake of Jesus Christ is actually the distinctive thing that we're here for. And if we ever want to answer any questions about what the authentic church looks like, maybe the simplest way that we can begin to ask is, is this a community that takes Christ-like risks?

That was actually the conclusion of the text I had prepared but it still seems to me to be true after the last 24 hours and, if anything, truer than ever. If the true church is a church willing to take Christ-like risks, and if that risk is shaped on the cross and demands that we face our mortality, then indeed, this is where we may expect to learn pastoral theology, moral theology, sacremental theology and any other kind of theology you care to name. And while it is not a school which, left to ourselves, we would have chosen, we are Christians because we believe the school of death is quite simply the only way in which we understand resurrection.