

## **Will you still love me when I'm 64?**

*At the 2013 BURG Conference John Rackley, Minister of Manvers Street Baptist Church, Bath gave two addresses on what it means for him to be approaching the time when he leaves that church and considers retirement. He found himself reflecting on a common human experience which may come to us at any time; but especially in times of transition. We begin with him introducing his theme:*

My title is a reference to the Beatles song which sounded odd to my teenage mind but now has a strange poignancy.

As someone who is 64, the age of 64 has a sort of threshold feel about it. It is a neither here nor there age. It suggests an ending which hasn't arrived yet and a point of no return approaching which is both tantalising and frightening. For a person of my generation it is the path to a state-inaugurated retirement – although that is all changing. Maybe in the future the song will have to become – will you still love me when I'm 67, 69 and so on – as pensionable age increases.

I am not going to engage with such matters as whether or not ministers retire or ordination ceases when one leaves one's last pastorate. I am not going to address the duty of care that churches have toward their minister. I am not going to speak about ministers and retirement specifically although I am a minister. Rather my reflections are about *remembering, passing time, coping with clutter and a seeking faith which is still finding God*; human experiences which in my case are happening to a minister.

So if someone were to ask me today: so what's going on at this present time now you're 64; anything to pass on; anything worth saying? I would reply: it's all about

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It is a paradox which being 64 has thrown into sharp relief – but is always there.

*What stories, images, experiences does 'holding on' suggest to you I wonder?*

But 'holding on to what?'

For the first part I want to help us consider what it means to hold on to God in a time of letting go. To do this I want to go back to the Beatles song, tell a story which my NT tutor approved of, read some Scripture and tell of place I have never visited.

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I want to think of this as a question from God. A question not just for me and now but a question for any of us at any time.

One of the areas of Spiritual Direction I most enjoy is Faith Development. How faith in a person changes not only in content but in style and focus. The work of James Fowler and his evangelical imitators like James Allinson highlights what we know but often ignore. The 'heart that we gave to the Lord Jesus Christ' and in my case at the age of 7 is a very different heart now I am 64. But the probing spirit of God asks the question of the Risen Lord to Peter by the lakeside: do you still love me?

Or putting the question another way; God asks 'what is it about me that still captivates you?' what is it about me that still holds you?' If God were an Ignatian the question would be 'what is your image of me'?

I wish I had known that question earlier in my faith journey. It is the sort of question that should be part of a Christian's journey long before we start thinking of retirement or the second half of life.

Here is my answer. Here is my image of God. This is what still captivates me about God. One sermon class many years ago I told a story which sent my NT tutor John Morgan-Wynne into ecstasy. This was a rare event but when it happened it was genuine and deeply affirming and I still bathe in the glow.

A man is walking along the promenade in Bournemouth. He is watching the sunbathers and the swimmers as the sea quietly laps at the edge of the beach. His attention is caught by a father and his son. They are building a sand castle. He stops to watch. The father is really enjoying himself. He's on his hands and knees scooping up the sand, dredging out a channel for a moat and is obviously enjoying himself. Two other people stop to watch and begin to cynically comment on what the father is doing. 'Look at that idiot'. 'He's a fool'. 'He should leave it to the kid'. The first man hears what they say but notices the effect on the child. He is watching the expression of the child – it is one of pure delight. His dad is playing with him. His dad is enjoying his world. He doesn't care about adult dignity. As far as he is concerned his dad is giving him all that he needs that day on a beach along the promenade in Bournemouth.

Here's some scripture:

*Let the same mind be in you as in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself (or as it may also be put) gave himself away and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of reputation. (Phil 2 5-8).*

Like a father playing on the beach along the promenade in Bournemouth.

This is the image of God that captivates me.

What I am holding onto is the God who gives himself away: in both senses of that expression –

God gives all that he is; he holds nothing back; he empties himself in grace and love; God gives himself away; here is infinite transparency; he discloses himself; no hiding but he leaves it to us to see what he is doing.

As I let-go of whatever the age 64 needs me to I hold on to the giving-away God; I am held by the letting-go God; the moving-on God; the God who de-clutters God of all the paraphernalia of words and affirmations and beliefs with which we burden him and ourselves. I am held by the God who has been faithfully giving himself away from the beginning of all things

It has been ever thus.

*Donald Nicholl was once Rector of Tantur University near Jerusalem. In his book 'Holiness' he describes an arresting experience.*

One spring morning I set myself the task of walking down the steep path that leads down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon where the Colorado River flows some 7000' below.

As you descend the Canyon you can observe on its walls layer upon layer of the sediments that have formed over millions of years, and you can relate those layers to the successive species of living creatures, both fauna and flora, that dwelt upon the earth before we appeared: Permian ferns and crinoids and armour-plated fish. Observing the traces of them in this way you feel a true kinship with all those beings, knowing that both they and you trace your existence back to the first moment of transcendence when life appeared on this earth.

And then you start to reflect that the very eyes with which you are observing these wondrous evidences are themselves the result of millions of years of striving for light, ever since the first pin-hole eye appeared on those primitive marine creatures, the cephalopods. And you are the beneficiary of that entire struggle for light, the heir of all that agony. And as you gaze at your hands or think of your ears or your tongue it takes your breath away to

envisage the innumerable strivings that had to be attempted before you could see and touch and hear and taste and speak.

Had any breakdown in that series of stirrings occurred it could have destroyed the possibility for you to see and hear and sing. The breakdown was prevented by the untiring faithfulness on the part of millions of beings. The mere thought of this makes you realise what an incredibly hard-won privilege it is simply to be a human being; and at the same time it is an awesome responsibility.

Every human has a responsibility towards all those creatures whose agony and groaning has given him life.

The writer obviously arrived at the bottom of the canyon both physically and spiritually exhausted. But his writing reminds me of the words of Jesus that the willingness to lay down one's life for your friends is a sign of the greatest love. When we speak of self-giving and letting-go in religious language and using religious story we should not forget that we are speaking about the nature of Nature. Life itself is a Gethsemane, a Golgotha and an empty tomb in a garden; an agony of bringing to birth; a climbing out of the grave; a laying-down so that new life may come.

The Resurrection was not declaring something new about God or creation or us it was revealing what was there all the time. It was the same as the extreme moment of transcendence that began all this and....us.

When we break bread and wine and call it Eucharist we go way beyond a religious act. We touch the reality which has been there from the beginning. A reality which is known in the breaking and pouring out .....of life.

In this second session I want to adapt the Beatles title and consider what it means to hold on to our own integrity in times of transition. So the question becomes

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In his latest book Richard Holloway suggests that the toughest lesson that life teaches is the difference between who we wanted to be and who we actually are. He also quotes with approval some words of Herbert Hamilton Kelly the founder of Kelham College which trained the men who would become the part of the Society of the Sacred Mission thus: *As I began a college for the training of the young for ministry I was expected to follow the customary system. I never dreamt of doing so. These men were to be teachers of a Faith given in a Creed. Was that all that they would need to achieve their task? I would rather ask **each man to look into his own soul, find in his own life its questions and difficulties, its perplexities and diversities.***

In other words ministry like discipleship like just being human is about growing in self-awareness. We need to have the time to know ourselves for who we are. It would appear that much of life can be taken up with acquisition, buying and preserving, building and restoring, possibly discovering answers to those perplexities and we carry around with us what we have done and who we know and what we deem important. It is there in our photographs, our diaries, our bookshelves, our CDs and secreted away in a box under the bed or in the cupboard. All the stuff that living our life has achieved, secured, purchased or been given. It is the raw material of our identity.

It is the 'you' we have become when we reach 64.

*What would be one those photographs or books or objects on the mantelpiece that is an important piece of stuff for you?*

But a time comes when it is no longer about trying to be who we want to be it is rather discovering who we are. It may happen long before we reach 64 or many years after and for some never. But for most of us it is discovering the exquisite pain of 'letting go'. To know who we are is to learn the art of letting-go what we are not.

So as I hold on to the letting-go God, the self-giving God, the giving-away God what must I let go?

*I wonder what you would consider is the most difficult letting-go that faces a minister > pray for ministers – we are often alone. We can be institutionalised into a lifetime of giving. We are not expected to ask for ourselves or feel good about it when we have to.*

In the autumn of 2000 Ron Ayres and I led a retreat together at Launde Abbey. As always when I was with Ron I learnt a great deal from him. On this occasion he read from John 11 and 20. I suggest you read *'John 11: 38-44 & 20:15-17a'*.

This is a record of some of what Ron said on that retreat:

Letting-go is a journey toward life. It inevitably travels toward a tomb and a death. In this way we find a new life which enfolds the old and brings it into a different place. It becomes an argument before it is a release. An argument within one's soul.

He then spoke of a call to a church which would have taken him away from his beloved Normanton. He spoke of being haunted by the possibility of what could have been. This haunting went on long after he had turned the church down. 'I became haunted by the possibility' he said – is it not a common experience, not confined to ministers?

It became an argument in his soul until he realised that he had to let himself become free. He would be staying put but needed to become free within. Like a Martha waiting by the tomb of hopelessness and trying to embrace lost possibilities that a Risen Christ would not offer.

Towards the end I wrote this in my journal of the retreat:

*Things need to be gathered up, gathered in before the releasing. Letting-go is about clearing away 'til we get down to the core again. Being ready to stop what we are doing, if it is no longer giving life to either ourselves or others – in order to discover what will. The Lord said to them: unbind him! Let him go!*

So what I am saying is that in the words of Qoheleth: *there is a time to store up and a time to throw away*: for only then will I possibly love me when I am 64.

*John led the Communion Service and first invited us to watch an extract of the film: Of Gods and Men. He commented: this film is about a monastic community in Algeria in the closing years of the last century. The monks have become close friends of the local Moslem community but in doing so have incurred the suspicion of both the army and terrorists. As law and order breaks down the existence of the monastery comes under threat. Both the Algerian government and the religious authorities want the Trappists to leave.*

The film follows them through the experience of coming to the decision to stay. It is not easy for them and there is much anguish. In the end they decide to remain knowing that they face almost certain death.

We pick up the story as they listen to Christian the community leader, share a Eucharist together and then enjoy a last meal.

Although I am not expecting you to be able to join the emotional demands of the film which make this such a poignant scene I hope you will see why I have included this as we come to our own time of sharing bread and wine having thought about

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I invite you watch their expressions as the meal is transformed into a deep contemplation of their own community and their future as they drink the wine brought to them by Luc, the medical monk.

As Jesus pointed out: if anyone wants to become my follower, let them take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

And finally some words of Walter Breuggemann that sum up approaching retirement and letting-go whilst holding on.

**THE WORLD FOR WHICH YOU HAVE BEEN PREPARED  
SO CAREFULLY IS BEING TAKEN AWAY FROM YOU...  
BY THE GRACE OF GOD.**

References were made to  
Holiness Donald Nicholl DLT  
Leaving Alexandria Richard Holloway Canongate  
Seeking Faith, Finding God John Rackley – available from John  
The Monks of Tibhirine John W Kiser St Martin's Griffin  
'Of Gods and Men' a film by Xavier Beauvois  
Philippians 2:5-8, John 11: 38-44 & 20:15-17a, and Luke 9: 23-24

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