

Talk Four – April 3rd 2019

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:33-39)

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. At times of loss and grief, we feel as though the carefully woven fabric of our lives were being torn in two. That the loss opens a yawning gap in our lives. We come apart at the seams. Almost literally.

So, in Genesis, Reuben tears his clothes when he finds Joseph gone from the well down which he and his brothers had thrown him. Likewise, their father Jacob, when he hears of the loss of Joseph, also tears his clothes. When David hears news of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, he too tears his clothes. (2 Samuel 1:10) A messenger came to Job and delivers the news that:

"Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you." Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. (Job 1:18-20)

In our first of these talks we discussed the idea of our selves being outward-facing masks, personas we construct, identities. Here – in guilt, in grief, in torment – we find

characters tearing their clothes; they are stripped of their superficial, worldly identities. The agony reveals their true, vulnerable, naked selves hidden beneath.

Grief is a great gap. And we enter this gap – stripped, exposed, and broken. We’ve all been there.

In many ways, this is the first gap I came to when considering these Lent Talks. It’s through this gap that I first came to think about the idea of a God of the gaps. On visits to families after a bereavement, as I sat and listened and planned a funeral with the grieving, I would listen to families talk so movingly about the gap left in their lives by the person they’d lost. The gap which they were categorically not looking to close. The last thing they were looking for was closure. The gap was precious.

And at the end of our meetings together, I’d always feel moved to pray for God to come into that gap, into the space of grief, of pain. Not to close it, or heal it, but to fill it with love. I felt we all wanted a God of the gaps. A God who comes to us in the gaps. And we all have gaps.

Some of you may be familiar with the work of Lois Tonkins, and her model of grief. It’s sometimes called the fried egg model. It goes like this. You draw a circle to represent yourself. And you shade in the part of the circle, the part of yourself, to show how much of yourself grief is occupying. After a terrible loss, patients tend to fill in the whole of the circle, shading it completely black. Grief consumes.

At first, Tonkins hoped to show her patients how – through counselling – she could reduce the extent to which the self was consumed by grief. She could shrink the part of the shaded part of the circle. But she found that’s not what happened at all. The grief does not diminish or shrink or grow fainter. Instead – as one of her patients put it – the circle of the self expands, grows around the shaded area. The grief remains the same size, but we grow

around the grief. Grief is like the yolk at the centre of ourselves. Precious. Even the best bit of ourselves.

So, I want to distinguish at the outset between two aspects of this evening's talk that we could easily confuse. Death is *not* the gap we're talking about. In fact, I want to say death isn't a gap at all. It is a junction, a bridge, a border between this life and the next. In a sense, it's the opposite of a gap.

But it's on account of *others crossing* that border, that a gap is left in *our* lives. We need to think a bit about the border before we get to the gap.

In Mark chapter five, when Jesus insists that Jairus's twelve-year old daughter is not dead but sleeping, the people around him laugh. Why do they laugh? Because they know that the girl has crossed a profounder border than that between sleep and wakefulness.

Karl Jaspers was a German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher and theologian. He came up with a general term for these borders. He called a border of this absolute sort a *Grenzsituation* or ultimate situation. For Jaspers, these situations are certain, decisive, essential. These ultimate situations are experienced at the limits of our existence. Jaspers describes them as

situations such as the fact that I am always in situations, that I cannot live without conflict and suffering, that I unavoidably incur guilt, that I must die . . . They do not change, they are ultimate. They are not surveyable; we see nothing else behind them. They are like a wall, we come up against, and upon which we founder.¹

They are like a wall we come up against and upon which we founder. Like all of Jaspers's limit situations, our death, is unavoidable. Or as our old friend Gregory of Nyssa puts it:

¹ Karl Jaspers quoted in Edwin Latzel, "The Concept of the Ultimate Situation in the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers" in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, edited by Paul Arthur Schlipp (New York: Tudor, 1957), 188.

For all created things are circumscribed within their own limits according to the pleasure of the creator's wisdom.²

And

To step beyond limitation, the boundary, would be to step outside being: and nature cannot step outside of itself.³

Death is of our nature. We can't step outside it.

The idea of the border or margin or limit was a crucial aspect of ancient Greek religious beliefs; the border held a special place in Greek thinking and worship. They appropriated and incorporated the marginal, the border into their fundamental approach to the world and to the divine. Temples were often sited at the edges of territories, or in isolated, liminal zones. Their god, Hermes, was born at the border; his name derives from the piles of stones that marked the edge of a territory. And yet, at the same time, he is a trickster, a traveller, a messenger, an inveterate crosser of borders.

The immovable boundary stone is surrounded with tales about the transgression of boundaries and the breaking of taboos through which a new situation, and a new, well-defined order is established.⁴

The very idea of a border was bound up with transgression. To cross a border is not to negate or deny it; rather, it is to reconcile divergence, difference. In other words, crossing a border is a deeply ambiguous act.

Smugglers would be lost without frontiers and prohibitions: they are merely the shadows of customs officials.⁵

² “τὰ μὲν γὰρ γηγόντα πάντα τοῖς ἰδίοις μέτροις ἐμπεριγεγραμμένα κατὰ τὸ ἀρέσαν τῆ σοφία τοῦ κτίσαντος” (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium I* [PG 45:365B]). In the *Life of Moses*, Gregory also states “The limits of the boundaries which circumscribe the birds or the fish are obvious: The water is the limit to what swims and the air to what flies” (*Life of Moses*, 2.236).

³ “οὐ γὰρ ἐκβαίνει ἑαυτὴν ἢ φύσις” (Gregory of Nyssa, *de Anima et Resurrectione* [PG 46:141A]).

⁴ Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*. Gifford Lectures, 1988–1989. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 156.

⁵ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy through the Looking-Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 193

Paradoxically, to deny the border is to affirm it. And we will all cross this border, all leave a gap behind in the lives of others. It's a border that is, for us, crossable only in one direction. Which makes the stories of resurrection in the gospels so problematic, or baffling. And beguiling.

We've opened this evening's talk with the story of the death of Christ, but in some ways, I would have liked to open with this passage from Mark chapter five which we've already touched on:

some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹ When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. (Mark 5:35-43)

Jesus has no time for Jaspers's ultimate limit or situation. Like Hermes, he recognises the border, but crosses it and establishes a new order.

I vividly remember seeing a mother, a friend of mine, talking to her twelve-year old daughter through the wicker lid of a coffin. That coffin lid was the barrier, the limit, the wall, the ultimate situation we come up against and upon which we founder. But it's *not* the gap. The gap is here, and it stretches through our lives, the lives we lead without our daughters, our spouses, our parents, our grandparents, our friends. The gap is in the going on.

And we, in turn, will leave a gap in the lives of others.

The girl in the wicker coffin, as I said, was the daughter of dear friends of mine. The girl in the coffin was a dear friend of mine. Out of the blue, she suffered a brain aneurism, and an entire community was plunged into shock, and into prayer. Our prayers – as she languished on life support – went unheeded, however. We prayed for a miracle, and none materialised. We prayed for a Talitha cum moment. None came. Eventually her parents turned off the life-support machine. And lost her. My God, my God, why have you forsaken us?

When a mutual friend asked me incredulously in the midst of that situation: “And you still believe in God?” I was pulled up short. Because the truth was: yes, I did believe in God, more than ever in fact. The deep psychological truth of that line from Job came to me:

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. It looks so counterintuitive, doesn't it? Why would you *worship* after everything has been taken from you? But that question comes from the same places as “You *still* believe in God?” As though worship and belief were somehow sides to a deal to be struck, negotiations. I'll worship you, I'll believe in you so long as you keep up your end of the bargain and make everything right.

So, when nothing comes right, when it's all wrong, why would you worship?

I'm not sure I really want to attempt an answer to that. Just to reflect, because the truth is – in those circumstances, like Job – it's just what we did. Light candles, walk together, sing together, keep vigil together. We worshipped. In lament, in grief, in agony, in community. And God was there in the gap with us. More than ever. And in fact. We all knew it.

Perhaps the point of the story about Jairus's daughter is not the fact that Jesus is able to raise her from the dead, but more: that he dares go “into the place where the child was.” He

goes to the border, breaks a taboo. Crosses that border, and returns with the girl. Death is a border, not a boundary, certainly not the edge or end of all things, not ultimate to Christ:

Christ leads me through no darker room
than he went through before;
he that into God's Kingdom comes
must enter by this door.⁶

Jesus doesn't *have* life; he *is* life. We are, because He is. Jesus Christ is that in virtue of which anything has life. "Through him all things were made." This greater life that Christ reveals and offers is not restricted to just life *this* side of the border. We need to see both sides now.

As I say, the last thing the family of the girl wanted, the last thing any of us wanted – was closure. We didn't want to close the gap left by our friend. We wanted to live in the gap. And God had chosen to live there with us. God had come to the gap. It's a gap that is still wide open, and still God-filled.

True life comes only through many, many journeys of loss and regeneration wherein we gradually learn who God is for us in a very experiential way. Letting go is the nature of all spirituality and transformation.⁷

I wouldn't be standing here, as a priest, were it not for that gap to which God came and filled with love. That gap which God keeps open, and through which I am still journeying.

And that's the real gap in the story we heard at the beginning, about Christ's death on the cross. The tearing of the curtain sounds like an act of vandalism, of destruction – but of course it's the opposite – it is revelation and regeneration.

⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Poetical Fragments of Richard Baxter*. 4th ed. (London: Pickering, 1821)

⁷ Richard Rohr. <https://cac.org/dying-with-christ-2019-04-01/>

Behind the curtain in the temple lay the Holy of Holies which contained the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat; only the High Priest was permitted once a year on the Day of Atonement to pass through the curtain and enter the Holy of Holies.

Once a year Aaron shall perform the rite of atonement on its horns. Throughout your generations he shall perform the atonement for it once a year with the blood of the atoning sin offering. It is most holy to the LORD. (Ex. 30:10)

Now, this is the day in Mark's gospel account the day of Christ's last breath – the real day of atonement. The day of at-one-ment. The day that heaven and earth are finally drawn together, when the sins of the whole world are atoned for in the blood of the innocent lamb. When no human-made curtain can divide God from the world. That which separated us from the Kingdom of God is effaced, torn down. And the Holy of Holies is open for all, and for all time. The border is breached. As Paul tells the Athenians,

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands. (Acts 17:24)

Christianity is properly an apocalyptic religion. Apocalypse means, literally, an unveiling. It means the tearing down of the curtain; it means the revelation of the Holy of Holies – for all the world. The crack in everything; that's how the light gets in. The gap.

Does the gap become less painful because we can see death as a door, as a border not as an ultimate situation? I don't know. Perhaps not. Losing someone we love is always agony. But what Jesus' going into *the place where the girl was* shows us is that the border between this life and that is as thin as a curtain. The curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom. The border is breached. The sunlight pours through the clouds.

In her song "Both Sides Now", Joni Mitchell reflects on how it's possible to see clouds differently at different points in one's life. She describes clouds as beautiful, then as blocking the beautiful. She needs to cross a border, to see both sides now.

Rows and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere
I've looked at clouds that way

But now they only block the sun
They rain and snow on everyone
So many things I would have done
But clouds got in my way

I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down and still somehow
It's cloud's illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all.⁸

I said at the beginning we were going to talk about grief as a gap, but it is also growth. Transformation. We just have to try to see from both sides now, as Christ does when he goes to the place where the girl is. Actually, grief and growth are indistinguishable or at least the growth depends on the grief, on the gap. There could be no growth were there not a gap to grow into, no journey to go on, no door, no darker room.

A hidden theme running through this evening's talk has been the loss of daughters. The agony of losing a child. My friends' daughter, Jairus's daughter. And I want to end with another lost little girl.

Detective Rust Cohle is the most brilliant, ruthlessly analytical and driven detective working the Badlands of Louisiana. And he has a tragic past. He's lost a daughter. The grief has destroyed his marriage, and all but dismantled his personality. He's an automaton, using

⁸ Joni Mitchell, "Both Sides Now"

work to disconnect himself from his pain that always threatens to engulf him and those around him.

As he and his partner close in on the criminal that sits at the centre of a web of murders they've been investigating, he's shot and mortally injured. He's rushed to Lafayette hospital and he dies on the operating table. But the doctors are able to resuscitate him and save his life. Later he talks to his partner about the experience of dying.

There was a moment - I know when I was under in the dark – there's something - whatever I'd been reduced to – not even consciousness, just a vague awareness in the dark - I could feel my definitions fading and beneath that darkness there's another kind – it was deeper – warm, like a substance – I could feel, and I knew, I knew my daughter waited for me. There. In the dark. So clear. I could feel her.⁹

“Why do you make a commotion, and weep.” We are called to an Easter faith. As detective Cohle puts it a few lines later: “Once there was only dark. You ask me, the light's winning.” We are called to the light, to joy, not because death, the border isn't real, but because the real is so much greater, deeper, than we could ever have imagined.

⁹ *True Detective*, Season One, Episode 8, “Form and Void.” 2014.

Prayer

God of the Gaps,

we pray for your sustaining presence in the gaps left by loved ones,

the gaps in our lives that are painful and precious.

Help us to grow towards you – into the gaps and through our griefs.

Guide us, we pray, on the many journeys of loss and regeneration we must take,

and teach us to see – both sides now,

how death is just a border

between love,

and love. Amen.

Colin Heber-Percy

Lent 2019