

## Safeguarding Sunday; Resignation of Archbishop Justin

It's been quite a week in the Church of England. We have all been shocked, first by the detailed revelations of the report about the abusive activities of John Smyth, and then by the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It has, literally, been beyond anything we might have imagined.

For those of you who have not been following the news in the past week, the report I just mentioned describes the activities of John Smyth, a lawyer, and evangelical Christian who abused a considerable number of young men, subjecting them to physical beatings in the name of making them better Christians. These activities were abhorrent, and knowledge of them in some church circles was not adequately investigated or exposed, leading to continued abuse and suffering, and ultimately the death of a young man in South Africa where Smyth had relocated towards the end of his life. The report also described how Archbishop Justin had some knowledge of that in recent years, and could and should have done more to ensure that it was properly investigated. If this had been done, it could have prevented further abuse. Archbishop Justin has done an immense amount during his leadership to strengthen the church's action to ensure is a safe place for all, and has always taken strong personal responsibility for this - and in the light of the report, and to apply the same standards to himself as to others, he has chosen to resign.

Archbishop Justin is part of our family here in Coventry, serving in this Diocese for the first, formative fifteen years of his ordained ministry. He was ordained in this Cathedral in 1992, served his curacy in Chilvers Coton in Nuneaton, and was then vicar of Southam. He joined the cathedral team here in 2002, serving as Canon for Reconciliation until he left to become Dean of Liverpool in 2007, Bishop of Durham in 2011 and ultimately Archbishop of Canterbury in 2013. Justin was gripped by our ministry of reconciliation when he was here, and has taken that as the heart of his ministry into the heart of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion around the world. He always, without fail, wears his Coventry Cross of Nails, the sign of those who minister here in this Cathedral - you will always see it in any picture of him. He is, as I say, part of our family.

We had not imagined the revelations of this week. It has shocked us. It has been devastating - devastating to begin to grasp the activities and behaviour of some within the church that was left unchecked for so long, devastating at the continued fall out from that behaviour and the suffering it caused. It has, as I said, been beyond our imagination.

Imagination was set as the topic for today's service, as we make our way through this season of reconciliation. And it is fundamental to the work of reconciliation, leading us into a future which is either for God, or against God. To invite the Spirit of God to inhabit and release our imagination is to open ourselves to God's future. Equally, to ask God's Spirit to set us free from an overly fearful imagination can release us from bondage to all that stands against God's future. The question, "what if" can be answered both positively, and negatively - and asking God to guide our hearts and minds as we imagine a way forward is essential to our lives as Christians.

Please understand me, it's not quite as simple as asking to be set free from all fear - we truly need to be alert to danger. One of the reasons why it has been hard to make the progress towards a safer church for all, is that it can be hard to imagine that someone within the church who we know and love. or even the church itself, may be a danger to others. We need sometimes to allow God to help us imagine the worst, but always within a promise of hope that we can find God's help. Simply burying our heads in the sand is not the Christian way: we must also be realistic, truthful, honest. Remember how Jesus explained to his disciples that they were heading towards Jerusalem, towards the cross, but it would not be the end.

However, we also need to allow God to guide and inspire us to imagine the best, however unimaginable. This is the message of our two readings this morning. They stand in such interesting contrast to each other - though for our encouragement, the outcome is actually the same! The

visitors to the tent of Abraham and Sarah bring a message of promise, to which Sarah laughs in disbelief. I rather like the way that what they offer is the promise of a child, but what Sarah seems immediately to think of is the physical pleasure of procreation - her thoughts, her imagination is rather shorter than longer term, it seems. Later, in chapter twenty, Sarah laughs again - but this time it is the open laughter of joy after her son Isaac is born. You can imagine, at various points in this story, of her turning to Abraham and saying, 'Who would have thought it? Who could have imagined it?'

Yet God caused it to happen - and, despite her misgivings, Sarah along with Abraham must have played their part. Imagination gave space to their activity - they allowed themselves to explore God's future for them, and found that it was indeed possible.

Mary, in contrast, was ready to allow her imagination to be exploded. The angel says to her, "nothing is impossible with God." It is a very similar message to the one given to Abraham, as Sarah was listening, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord.?" And for Mary, this led her into a life of obedience to God's will for her and for her son, Jesus. Later, in what we call the Magnificat, her experience is contrasted with the proud who are "scattered in the imagination of their hearts."

We can sometimes think of the call to obedience, of discipleship, as Christians, as a call to follow the *law*. (It is, perhaps, this desire to get everything *under control* that led to the catastrophic activities of John Smyth and others like him.) But here, in our scriptures, the call is to follow God's *imagination*, an altogether more creative act. To imagine God's wonderful, impossibly possible future, and to step into it. To obediently allow God to unlock our imagination, and act on what we begin to see.

"Take my hand," says Willy Wonka to Charlie Bucket as they step into the wonderful chocolate factory, "come with me, and you'll be, in a world of pure imagination. Reach out, touch, what was just in your imagination" But this is not a fairy tale - this is more real than real. In contrast, Paul Simon, in his song, "My little town" describes the result lack of imagination: "And after it rains there's a rainbow - And all of the colors are black; It's not that the colors aren't there - It's just imagination they lack - Everything's the same back in my little town."

Imagination is the springboard from which so much else comes, and especially in the work of reconciliation. As John Paul Lederach, who we quote so often here says, we need God's help to grow the *moral imagination* that gives us the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies. And Walter Brueggeman, the great Old Testament scholar, says: the *prophetic* must be *imaginative* because it is urgently beyond the ordinary and the reasonable". It's one of the reasons why we make so much of art here in the Cathedral, as it can help with that journey of unlocking our imagination.

For things to change, we need God's help with our imagining. In this season of reconciliation we are exploring what it means to be vulnerable, imaginative and courageous in the journey of reconciliation. To be imaginative means allowing ourselves to see our future through God's eyes, not our own - that is not to be dishonest, far from it - but it's to be truly honest, truly real, in a different way. And to be sure, that will involved relationships, actions, which might be far beyond our human imagination, but not beyond the Spirit of God.

Imagination is a fundamental call on our lives. It is not about flights of fancy, it is about being open to God. Those of you who are here regularly may have noticed that I always finish my sermons with words from Ephesians Chapter 3. Today is no exception - and as you listen to these words again this morning, please ask God to throw open the doors of imagination in your hearts and minds, and to step through into whatever God has to do in and through you for the sake of God's Kingdom.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*

Lederach imagination

Stated simply, the moral imagination requires

1. the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies;
2. the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity;
3. the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act;
4. and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.”

(John Paul Lederach, *Moral Imagination* 5, [my numbering])