

St Michael's, Barnes - Mark Oakley: 'A Good Year', Advent Sunday, 2017

Bishops of the Church of England are not always known for their poetic talents. However, one bishop of London, Henry Montgomery Campbell, who was known, amongst other things, for his dry humour did once try his hand at poetry. He wrote a short 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'.

So, a priest friend who've you known for quite a while, and one who is certainly not dead in any way, asks you to come and preach at his church in Barnes. You accept happily and take a look at the readings for the day and you read the words 'beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come'. The words resonate and you think of preaching to your friend's congregation and your heart beats a bit quicker and that's uncomfortable.

Tell them why. Tell them that it wasn't that long ago that you had chest pain going up some stairs, that you ended up in the heart hospital having a lead put in your groin up into your heart, that the doctor turned the screen round and said 'take a look. You're a lucky man, Mr Oakley, you had about three months left'. Tell them how you looked at that screen, looking like a sat nav of veins and arteries and for the first time really realised you are a body, that although you live in your head, in words and ideas, you are a fragile, time-limited body, dependent on that strange pulsing miracle on the screen over your head. Tell them how you asked the doctor if he would kindly stop talking and get on with it then. How he laughed and placed a tiny stent to open up the artery so that your blood could flow free, free and fast. Tell them how you had to look away from the monitor at that point, you wanted to live by faith and not by sight. You just hoped the doctor had the opposite view.

Tell them it was that day, after crying with relief that it looked as if you'd be ok, lying on the hospital bed, that you made some decisions. You decided to enter a civil partnership after having been fearful before of what it might do to your future ministry. That day, you didn't really care about that any more. You just wanted to acknowledge the love which has carried you through many years of your life, the person even now holding your hand in the recovery ward saying 'It's ok. We're still here'. It was that day too, when he'd gone home, that I said to God in a voice I felt was actually me, that we were alone now and could we please start again?

This was not a day like any other. It felt at least I was seeing I was accountable. It took a hospital bed to get me to see that the things that matter most in this world - love, relationship, connection, trust, wisdom - these are the things that increase as they are shared. The more you give of these the more you have. They are unlike wealth and power therefore, where if I win, you lose. In all the things that we know matter more than anything else the truth is that if you win, I win too. Tell them in that sermon it puzzles you why it took you so long to see it, that you had to be distilled, that now if you understand anything these

days it's that this is the truth that Christian faith celebrates. God gives us our being. We give back our becoming, who we become in the time we have. God from time to time changes our full-stops into commas, loving us just as we are but loving us so much he doesn't want us to stay like that, loving so we can become more, so we can learn that the more you give, the more you get, the more everyone gets. It's what grace means I think, receiving more than you deserve. It's what our world at the moment seems to lack, making us a world where if you're not at the table you are probably on the menu.

Don't bore those good people of St Michael's so end by telling them months have passed and churchy stuff doesn't hold the same interest it once did but tell them how that when the doctors told you that you needed some repair work in your heart, you sense God agreed. And that it's still true, work in progress, trying to make a life of love and courage. Being a priest still feels like I'm trying to help other people have that relationship with God I only wish I had myself.

Now, when I come into a church I know that I have not walked into a newsroom, somewhere just to get more information in an overloaded world. No. when I walk into this church I have walked into a poem. And what we call the Church's year is the way the poem of our faith captures something of the landscape of our hearts and the heart of God. We do not come in here for information, we come for formation, to be formed a little more, to become a little more like the one we profess to follow. And our hearts are complex things. Advent's purple gives voice to our sense of incompleteness, our calling out to be touched back into life and be made whole. Christmas reveals how God crawls in beside us wherever we are, and as Epiphany reminds us, whoever we are. Lent is a snowfall in the soul, a time to admit mistakes and needs, seeing ourselves like Shrove Tuesday pancakes as fat and flat and in need of distillation, to see that the best things in life are never things. Holy Week and Easter invite us to see a world of shallow expectations turned inside out, of the cost of love, of life set free and hope begin to work its way into the Pentecost truth that Christians are not called at the end of the day to be loyal to the past but to be loyal to the future. The Church's seasons are really the seasons of our lives and the lights and shadows of the reality of God who is never the object of our knowledge but the cause of our wonder. The seasons point us to what matters. God is in this world as poetry is in the poem. Come in here and enter the poem so that it will translate into who you become. This will make the year good.

We ignore the Church's year with the same loss as if we ignore our own years and all that they contain, all that we enjoy and all that we endure. I ignored the gift of years, until some urgent heart repair was done. So, at the end of the day, tell them you know that when RS Thomas said that a poem is what reaches the intellect by way of the heart, you think he was speaking of God too, at least for you, that day your heart became the focus and you realised you wanted to love better, your partner, your family, your friends, even those you have yet to meet. And God. And God.