

evening of November 8th (Saturday before Remembrance Sunday) in the middle of Tulse Hill Estate.

Tulse Hill Estate is not a peaceful place. Many people feel afraid to live there. Violence is not uncommon but, working with the Residents' Association, we hope there will be some who will come out and stand with us to say, "We want to live differently. We value life." We hope to have some speakers: young people, for example, to share how they would like to live; testimonies from those who have made peace with someone they were previously fighting with; we hope to have representatives of others faiths present - especially Muslims - to demonstrate that our common desire for peace is strong, in spite of differences of opinion or belief. I hope we might have some from the local Territorial Army. We think there may be others who live in other parts of Tulse Hill, ready to cross estate boundaries for the sake of peace.

It's just a gathering; it's just some people with candles; it's just some prayers (or thoughts for the non-religious) in a public place on a cold, dark, November evening, but we hope it will be meaningful and pertinent, and provide some inspiration for actual change in our individual and social lives.

For further reading: Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: How the First World War Divided Britain*; Richard van Emden, *Boy Soldiers of the Great War* and *Meeting the Enemy*; Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*.

## **“Safer than a Known Way” - Spiritual Formation for Pastoral Leadership**

**Tim Marks**

Independent Trainer and Counsellor

Sarah looked at me rather fiercely and demanded: “What do you really want to happen?” I felt a little nonplussed and demurred: “But you’re hiring me to teach your clergy leadership skills. This is about your vision for the diocese”. Sarah was having none of it. “You’re teaching leadership skills all over the place and you must

have some reason, some vision, something you want to happen. You can't just shove it all off on to us.” “I suppose I want to see congregations somehow transformed. Like we say every morning in the Daily Office, ... *may the light of your presence, O Lord, set our hearts on fire with your love.* Yes. The fire of love.” She looked at me incredulously. “You think it's possible? You think people can be set on fire? You think they are combustible?” “Yes..Yes, I think I do”

They say that Myers-Briggs Type Indicator ‘ENTJs’ don't know what they believe until they tell someone, so people like me have these epiphanies from time to time, for which we need people like Sarah. It doesn't happen without them. I didn't know that I believed God's people were still combustible, but I do. It is the best reason for engaging in pastoral leadership, because there is a bush burning in the wilderness of post modernity and nothing can put it out and we can be part of its burning and light and glory.

I have been asked on a number of occasions over the last year to say something about spiritual formation for leadership to groups of parish clergy and others. Is there anything new than can be said? Probably not. So this is nothing new, but nor is it old stuff rehashed with some fancy dressing. Rather I have positioned my thinking around two axioms under the friendly fire of sceptical clergy groups.

First and foremost, **the fire of God can only be caught from those who are ablaze themselves.** When we seek ordination, it is usually because we have seen something we wish to be a part of, a tradition we wish to belong to, or some magic has changed us and we want to pass it on. We try, stumblingly, to tell this to the gatekeepers of the church institution. I have been successfully (and unsuccessfully) a ministerial candidate for both the Baptist and Anglican denominations and am I proud to have served both. Those who interviewed me were identical characters – slightly austere, safe, cautious. The guardians of the institution. They all required of the candidates a combination of theological training, respectability and a peer group.

I don't deride theological training – I think we don't get nearly enough of it. I suspect Will Willimon is right when he insists the core problem with the church is not demographic or cultural or lack of expertise, but theological. However, I suspect that, behind

the demand for theology from the guardians, there lies also the deadening hand of social control, because not only do we have the gospel to proclaim but we have the church to run. So we end up having to cut a deal. This appears to me to be the same whatever church, tradition or tribe we come from. The deal is between spending our time fulfilling the ordination vows of prayer, immersion in scripture, theological wrestling, working with the growth of souls AND running the church. Guess which gets short changed in the long term? We start to run on empty. The fire starts to go out. One of the most telling evidences of this in the UK culture, at least, is quite dreadful preaching.

Some months ago I was watching about 30 people on the other side of the choir of one of our great cathedrals losing the will to live during an interminable sermon. It was not just that it was inappropriate to the occasion and the congregation, nor yet that it was intellectually trivial. It was not really a Christian sermon. It was about being good in some kind of vaguely “Christian” way. It was about our duty to support the church. A boring sermon about a boring God. Forgive what seems like a rant. I think the gospel is at stake. I say this not from any theologically partisan point of view.

The best thing I ever learned about preaching I learned from the person I agreed with least theologically. His name is Michael Taylor and, when we were both a lot younger, he was my philosophy tutor at Manchester University. The thing I learned about preaching from him was about its focus. A Baptist Area Superintendent asked him whether he was going to preach on stewardship the following Sunday. Michael sighed a little and said “You can’t preach about stewardship. You can give a little talk about stewardship. You can only preach about Jesus.” Which is true and I never forgot it.

If we lose our ability to preach the gospel or lose our notion of what the gospel is, we are sunk. Sometimes, a light descends, a fire falls and we are captivated by what is being said from the pulpit. I have experienced such moments in little chapels and great cathedrals. I remember one of the Canons of Wells Cathedral preaching a sermon in which we were all aware that he was first preaching to himself, and we were gripped. Surrounded by a silence out of which loving, thoughtful words came. Because God was speaking to us through this man. Doors of beauty and profundity and delight and freedom were swinging open and the service went on

into the Eucharistic action so that bread and wine and communion with others were all one blessed movement into the heart of God. This should be parish normality and we should be intolerant of anything which perverts our capacity to offer anything less. The spirituality that should underlie Christian spirituality must be a spirituality shaped by the Christian gospel. It is not elitist neither is it egalitarian. That is to say, the main movement is not ours towards God but his rush, his speed, his journey to us.

Second, **when we talk about spirituality we are talking about a formation which is slow, a process that is patient and practised.** Wine matures slowly. So does cheese. So does wisdom. So do saints. Usually through immersion in life's complexity and joy and suffering and darkness. People, as Thomas Merton said, with a preference for the desert. It has seemed to me that there are things which might be said about the spirituality which could underlie long, thoughtful and clever leadership, but they would not be about technique of any sort nor yet short cuts. They would be about how we stay alight with love under the sometimes deadening and inevitably enculturating conditions of ministry. They would be about how we might expect to mature and in what ways. The slow growth of a mature love.

*“I ask thee for a thoughtful love,  
Through constant watching wise...  
And a heart at leisure from itself  
To soothe and sympathise”<sup>113</sup>*

What a phrase this is: “a heart at leisure from itself”. How might that be found in the activist and public place of Christian ministry? By a long slow process. Maybe this is the point at which to remember the ironic story Jesus told about rich people getting into heaven and camels getting through the eye of a needle. I think it was C S Lewis who said: “You can get a camel through the eye of a needle but it doesn’t mean to say it will be easy on the camel”.

In *Seasons of a Restless Heart*, Debra Farrington tells of how a friend came to stay and she decided to take her to the top of a nearby peak – the walk was strenuous, but the view breath-taking from the top of the mountain. On the climb down, they met a solitary man.

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<sup>113</sup> *Methodist Hymnbook* (1904) 602.

“Is it far to the top?” he asked.

“It is quite a way yet, but this is the worst bit” she replied

He thanked them and walked on.

A little while later they met two girls.

“Is it far to the top?” one of them asked.

“It is quite a way yet, but this is the worst bit” she replied again.

One girl gripped her by the arm and said,

”I don’t want to know that – just tell me sweet lies”.

Debra said, “Sure – it’s just round the bend”

And the girls walked on happily.

Tell me sweet lies. If you want to take a complex, multi dimensioned being with free will who has been taught to know best and completely change their whole mentality, the way they see the world, themselves, other people and God, then you might assume this will take a long, long time. We are formed or reshaped by our immersion in the personal disciplines of walking by faith and the practices of living in the faith community. “The God known in faith is an overflowing reservoir of all that is valuable and good...In the experience of faith and the life of faith a transformation takes place. Meaning, value and life direction all become relativised. They are no longer the prize we seek. In Christ our very hungers become transformed so that to live in Christ is the only food we crave. In Christ we are free to give up all else – even meaning, value and life direction and our search for them. They are not God...God requires of us the sacrifice of all we would conserve and grants us gifts we had not dreamed of”.<sup>114</sup>

We must not settle for less than this or we shall feel as though God is training us for a marathon when we thought we had entered the parent’s egg and spoon race. We shall grumble – and how! It is our immersion in community that will teach us most and be our defence against the narcissistic spiritualities of the present day. What has gone wrong is a whole rack of relationships. With God, with ourselves, with our fellow human beings and with the creation. So we have to say that, if we aspire to lead God’s people, we should expect to be shaped by the same practices and disciplines as them.

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<sup>114</sup> Growing in the life of faith. Craig Dystra

A spirituality for pastoral leadership cannot be a separate subset of the subject, a kind of clergy cadre in which we are somehow blessed and cursed with greater knowledge and expertise. I remember Baptist and Anglican clergy who met their parishioner's faith with a patronising tolerance, as of children who thought fairy stories were all true and Santa Claus really existed. The clergy may have had access to greater depth of background and the tools of biblical exegesis but it did not excuse them from wrestling with the narrative, with the story that shapes us together with all God's people. We are not excused personal or corporate Bible study because we have passed some exams in New Testament Greek and read a bit of Barth. A spiritual leader is formed by exercising faith with the people of God and being shaped like them by the practices of the faith community, the core of which are hearing the Word of God together, sharing the hospitality of the Eucharist and our continuance in a life that has been baptised.

I've been trying to make the point that we start from somewhere, we position ourselves, we find a poise around two central thoughts. The leader must have a personal faith trajectory into God if he or she is to be credible. This is a faith exercise, not some programme with guaranteed results and thus it is "safer than a known way"<sup>115</sup>. This is going to take a long time and is more like a slow maturing of a good wine than the achievement of a goal. Forget the tick boxes.

### **Shaped by a story**

I spent 10 years working in the world of counselling, the person centred world which is friendly to mysticism and contemplative approaches, to quietness of heart and to interior space and silence. I feel at home here. Of course, it is cool to be a Buddhist in the world of counselling – less cool to be a Christian. Very uncool to wrestle with a gospel that is about the intrusion of God, the impossible situations which yield only when the words "but God" come into play. So that quietness is jarred by people like Ruth Burrows who says: "What a travesty that faith means a life of

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<sup>115</sup> I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied, "Go out into the darkness. And put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than the light and safer than a known way!" So I went forth and finding the hand of God trod gladly into the light. (*M. Louise Haskins*)

peace and security! It is meant to open one to all anguish, to walk on the edge of the world with no security but Jesus”

Or Brueggemann: “Jeremiah’s yearning for God is not a pious or mystical quest. It is a court of last resort after every other yearning has failed”

A divine being, rising from the cool contemplative depths of us, would be so relaxing. But the God who lurks around our neighbourhood waiting to upset our religious securities? That’s another deal altogether. I think Jesus is both the enemy and the saviour of the church. He is both our only hope and our deadliest foe. His gospel is not only promise but threat, because there is something in us that likes the conformities and safeties of religion and fears the outrageous freedom that he might bring.

Apparently, God thinks of religion as a mixed blessing. And this seems to start in Exodus. We are introduced to a God who is something of an embarrassment to the spiritualities of post modernity, if we are honest. This is a God who will not be encountered in the vast developmental maps of Ken Wilber or psychosynthesis – not that they are to be despised – I am simply making the point that there is an awkwardness in the biblical narrative which will not be easily assimilated into our maps of human development. Exodus 5.22-6.9 sets the scene for the faith journey of the Old Testament and the future calling of the church/faith community of the New Testament. Moses is conscripted by the God called Yahweh to set free the people of Israel from the bondage of slavery. He is little more than a voice crying in the wilderness, a gun without ammunition, an ambassador with a country. The imperial power treats him with derision and tightens the grip on the slave people. Moses gets mad. He yells at God: “Why did you ever send me? Why have you mistreated these people? Since I first came to Pharaoh, to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people and YOU HAVE DONE NOTHING AT ALL TO DELIVER YOUR PEOPLE”.(5.22)

“I blame God”, he says. Already there is an ownership of task – he identifies with the people of God. Already there is a spirituality of risk and demand, of non-acceptance that God will do nothing. The status quo is not an option. He is implying, I quit unless you do something. God meets this with four commitments which unfold

his intentions and reveal him to be a purposive God.<sup>116</sup> God reaffirms that he will intervene in space and time and history. This God who will shape the history of Israel will be an active participant in their affairs (6.6). There will be an on-going relationship in which there will be real knowledge – although God is inaccessible, he wills to be known (6.7b). There will be a land, a physical manifestation of blessing. The faith of Israel is not an esoteric faith, but a physically rooted faith, demonstrated in the domestic as much as in the devotional (6.8). There will be a community shaped by particular practices. God will be evidenced in the world by their common life together (6.7a).

Whatever we have to say about the way in which spirituality resources the task of pastoral leadership, it must be a spirituality that emerges in some way from and keeps faith with this awkward narrative. I say awkward because while there are valid spiritualities which may be helpful in all kinds of different ways and for different situations, they may be unhelpful in shaping us for this task. What is presented to us is extraordinary and outrageous. Moses' lack of deference, his demand that God take action and implicit faith that he could if he wanted to, is shocking, electrifying. There is no cultus surrounding the approach, no intermediary priest, no ceremony, just naked, intimate confrontation between an angry, frightened, caring man and a God who has yet to prove himself. This is where the forming for pastoral leadership starts, it seems to me.

When I read Thomas Brooks' great prayer request, I feel that I am hearing passion from the same tradition: "And when you are in the mount for yourselves, bear him up on your hearts who is willing to spend and be spent for your sakes, for your souls. Oh pray for me that I may be more and more under the rich influences and glorious outpourings of the Spirit; that I may be an able minister of the New Testament, not of the letter but the Spirit; that I may always find an everlasting spring and an overflowing fountain within me, which may make me constant, faithful and abundant in the work of the Lord; that I may live daily under those inward teachings of the Spirit, that may enable me to speak from the heart to the heart, from the conscience to the conscience and from experience to experience; that I am be a burning and shining light,

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<sup>116</sup> Plot and Purpose in the Old Testament. E.A. Martens

that everlasting arms may still be under me; that whilst I live, I may be serviceable to His glory and His people's good; that no discouragements may discourage me in my work; and that when my work is done I may give up my account with joy and not with grief. I shall follow these poor labours with my weak prayers, that they may contribute much to your internal and eternal welfare and so rest, Your soul's servant in our dearest Lord, Thomas Brooks (1659)".

This man seems cut from the same cloth as Moses, hammered on the same anvil of care, passion and intimacy with God.

Christian pastoral leaders are formed slowly by the same practices of the people to whom they minister. They worship. They struggle for faith. They embed this contrarian story of the human condition in their hearts and their minds. They allow God to change them. They are open to being combustible. There isn't a known way. Just the empty wilderness for people with a preference for the desert, who crave the fire and cloud of God.

## **God Is Not Arbitrary: Homosexuality and Theological Reflection**

### **Philip Joy**

*Retired Baptist Minister*

In response to Alun Brookfield's excellent piece of biblical exegesis in the previous edition, I offer the opposite approach to the LGBT issue. Where he began with our Bible-reading and challenged our theology, I would like to begin with our theology and challenge our Bible-reading. This concerns a question which I think the churches have not only got badly wrong, but which is a pastoral and evangelistic sore-thumb of unappreciated proportions: one which maligns the good name of our God.

### **My Starting Point**

No-one does theology in a vacuum and what do we know that we have not been taught? As for presuppositions, I am one of that Bible College cadre who was blessed by NOT studying Christian