

GRENFELL TOWER COMMUNITY: LIVING PARABLES

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann tells us that the parables of Jesus are subversive speech. The parable turns our theological expectations upside down; the parable pulls the rug from under our neat, comfortable, ready-made images of who God is. Brueggemann specially likes that the parable shows that God takes the trouble to evolve with us, and with our human thoughts about God, and takes the trouble to be known in the language we use. So every time we find another way of speaking about God, the reality of who God opens up for us in a new way.

And I think Brueggemann is right:
Words matter; language shapes reality.

So we had better choose our words carefully. That's one reason I value, along with many of you, the language of poetry that my clergy colleagues bring into preaching. When we pray, for example, the words of, R.S. Thomas, Mary Oliver, Carol Ann Duffy, or Philip Larkin, as we heard recently, in his poem 'Water'.

To construct a religion ...
I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.

I see poetry as an exercise in endless listening. A poem is like the conch you pick up by the seaside and hold up to your ear. And what you hear is nothing less than the endless murmuring of the sea.

Poetry is nothing less than listening with our eyes, and seeing with our ears. In poetry, words matter; language creates reality. This, too, is true of the parables of Jesus.

A few days ago, the BBC followed a young woman taking part in the first British Sign Language poetry competition. They went

to Bristol and followed Honesty Willoughby who was shortlisted for the competition. In Honesty's sign-language poetry, body language does the talking, and the imagination does the listening. It's easy to mistake BSL for a kind of shorthand. But as the twenty-year-old shows us, the complex grammar of Sign Language is a visual, gestural, performative kind of "listening." She took third place, with a poem about a woman who borrows a book that takes her into a fantasy world, a world from which she has to return – reluctantly – to face the real world. And Honesty can't wait to compete again next year. Her sign-language poetry is an exercise of words, emotion, and embodied imagination.

This was perhaps asking too much of Jesus' disciples. And I wonder if they suffered from a problem some of us, maybe all of us, have from time to time. Let me speak for myself, here: I'm a terrible listener, and have to work really hard to truly hear what someone else is actually saying. I have selective hearing. I have special filters that are very good at tuning in what I want to hear, and tuning out the things I don't want to hear. I do the same with Jesus when his teaching challenges what I believe.

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Jesus is standing in front of a crowd. He gets into a parable about God, but in a way that demands from his hearers ears and imagination. He tells a parable of the wheat and the tares, – good wheat and toxic weeds, are growing side by side.

My bible dictionary tells me that tares are a species of rye, that grows plentifully in Syria and Palestine. The seeds of this grassy plant have a strong toxin that causes dizziness and disorientation if ingested. This isn't something you want near your food. The problem is that tares

resemble stalks of wheat. And it's only when tares grow to maturity and the ear appears that you can tell the toxic grass from the healthy wheat. Now, in Jesus' day, everyone close to farming days would have picked this up when they heard it.

But the parable demands deep listening. And the disciples object to that: "Why do you speak in parables?" they protest. The unspoken implication is, "People don't understand what you're saying. Why not just come out and say what you mean?"

But Jesus is not backing down: "It's so that you will pay close attention. God has given you eyes to see, and ears to hear. You are the first to hear this, so pay attention. Then you will know what questions to ask."

And he doubles down on the challenge. And tells another parable:

The kingdom of God is like a man who found a treasure in a field. In his joy, he buried the treasure, went away, and sold everything he had. And bought the field.

No response from the disciple. So, another parable:

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It's the smallest of all seeds. But it grows into a shrub as large as a tree, and that's where the birds make their nest, and raise their young.

The disciples aren't happy with this either. They simply don't get it. And so – and here's the telling detail – they wait until everyone leaves, and they go home. And only then do they dare ask a question they were probably too embarrassed to ask in front of a crowd.

Jesus, we have a question about the teaching about the mustard seed, and about the treasure in the lost field. But can we first go back to the one about the wheat and the weeds.

What exactly do you mean? What is this about wheat and weeds planted in a field? Who's the enemy, and what is the good seed?

If you're like me, and you sometimes hear a Gospel text and something Jesus says makes no sense at all. Take comfort, we're in good company: the disciples had the same problem. But I think what the disciples miss is the thing that's most obvious. **In the parables, Jesus is modelling for them an open-ended way of talking about God.**

So not only is Jesus saying in these pithy little stories that we can know God, and we can begin by talking about God in very simple terms, but what we say about God should make room for more conversation about God.

Declarative statements, descriptive statements, prescriptive statements are great conversation killers. A bit like being at a party and saying to someone, Hi, I'm a theologian and a priest. But the parables of Jesus are start conversation about God with very simple stories, that have an immediate, up front, and personal impact on the listener. And yet they leave us thinking for a while, and sometimes, for a very long time.

I always think of the parables of Jesus as Taizé chants that need repetition, time, rhythm and revisiting; a physical disposition and openness to what God has to say to us.

But the other point the disciples miss – and something Matthew's gospel leaves in his story for us to discover – is that the parables are always invitations to talk back. **The parable is only a spark, you can't take it apart, study it, and dissect it. It's an energy packet to stimulate fresh thinking about God.**

That kind of fresh thinking and attentive listening is difficult at the best of times, let alone when every manner of activity and stimulus competes for space in our seeing and hearing. But if we are going to talk

back to the parable, then we need to hear what it's saying, to work out what it really means.

But sometimes, the only way we can do that is talking back might just mean that we are allowed to get mad, specially when we hear things we can't go along with, or simply don't understand.

And if that's where you are with this parable, – you are perplexed, or troubled by its words of judgement, or mad that Jesus isn't saying what you want him to say – then you know you are in the right territory: you are in the world of listening with heart and mind. And you are in conversation about God, with God, and hopefully in the company of others of us who struggle in the same way.

And maybe you have a parable of your own to offer. I'm always surprised that the disciples in the Gospels don't come up with their own word pictures to describe the kingdom of God. But I suppose they – again, like us – are having a hard-enough time keeping up with what Jesus is saying to try to better and propose something else he ought to be saying.

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I am in good company, I know, with those of you who have had the tragedy of Grenfell Tower on your minds lately. And if you struggle with the question of God, and how God could allow this to happen to innocent people, then I share your struggle. I wonder, though, whether there is a conversation to be had here. Is there a parable, a picture of God and the world that can trouble our settled thinking, and give us something fresh to focus on?

I spent a day last week at a distribution centre near Grenfell Tower. I was there with a group of volunteers from the university where I work. We were invited to work alongside Salvation Army volunteers. But I didn't expect to meet also neighbours from around Grenfell Tower, people who know the survivors, or who had family or friends who died in the fire.

But there they were, rolling up their sleeves, doing what they could, in the most practical ways, to help the many people who have been displaced by the tragedy. Our job on the day was to sort and shelve a warehouse full of donations, donations collected from retailers, including everything from clothing to baby supplies, blankets and roll-up mattresses, toiletries.

Everything was piled high in boxes or bags. And it took a team of about twenty of us to organise the goods, label them by categories, age, gender, size, and so forth. Another team would come the next day to start packing items according to the needs of individuals and families for collection at the Westway Sports Centre.

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It was especially good to be with the local residents. Some of the volunteers had been there day after day since the effort was first organised. Others, like me, were there for the day. Some had travelled from Surrey or Kent to lend a hand. But the volunteers from the area, who have much in common with those who perished in the fire and with survivors, left a particular impression on me.

We have all seen the show of anger towards the council authority and government officials in the news. That's what has been in the news, and for good reason. Scratch under the surface and you begin to discover that poverty, and divisions of class and race play into the tragedy.

However, and here is where I found something of a parable in that experience, the prevailing mood was without question one of HOPE. The people I met and spoke with throughout the day were grateful to have the company of complete strangers in their time of need. This was deeply humbling.

I was there for only for a day, and would go back to a comfortable home at St Peter's later that evening. There was no sense in pretending otherwise. The people

I met from Grenfell Tower area and I live in different worlds.

But none of that mattered once we arrived at the at the Salvation Army distribution centre and were organised into working teams. People simply got on with the work. No one felt sorry for themselves. No one looked back. No one needed a reminder that volunteers come and go, social housing will always be a problem, and that, although Grenfell Tower is only 3/4 of a mile from Royal Crescent Mews and Holland park and million £ homes, and only 1/2 a mile from St James's Gardens in its Georgian Grandeur, these realities are worlds apart one from the other.

But most importantly, i met a community, by that i mean, a people who know who they are, where they come from, and what keeps them going. Yes, they are, a community facing adversity at the best of times: migrant workers and asylum seekers, people who know poverty, possibly going back generations; people who struggle with long-term employment. And yet my overwhelming impression was of people know from adversity in the past that coming together and staying together as a community – linking arms in their time of need – is that way to overcome their struggle today.

Could it be that this is what Jesus mean when he says the poor, you will always have with you? Meaning, poor people are always there for one another. The poor will always be there for you!

And so rolling up their sleeves, and teaming up with anyone who would come alongside, the people of the community of Grenfell Tower are simply determined to go on.

A parable forces us to start afresh, to try again, and put into different words, unexpected words, words that catch the imagination in a new way, and tell us something about who God is, or is not.

All I heard that day – in conversations about who was lodging with whom, and

who has gone up to family elsewhere, and who was expecting their first baby, and so were looking forward to and are thankful for a new place to live — all I heard, all I saw was living parables of hope.

And I want to know, how can we live those parables of hope, here at St James's, here and now, where wheat is growing, and tares are burned away, day by day.