



paradox and apologies

A married couple were watching one of those heavy-duty sports channels on their mega-sized, room-dominating TV. During a commercial break they resumed an earlier conversation about life and death, and the need for Living Wills (or Advanced Decisions as they are now called). The husband said to his wife that he would never want to exist in a vegetative state, dependent on some machine and taking fluids from a bottle. At which point his wife got up, unplugged the TV and threw out all his beer.

You perhaps recognise something close to home in that. None of us would want to exist in a vegetative state, dependent on some machine and taking fluids from a bottle and yet there may well be some sense in which that is what we do already, one way or another.

I have always been of a serious turn of mind – a feature that has sometimes mystified and irritated those close to me. I take no credit for this disposition, and likewise no blame. We know enough about the competing claims of nurture and nature to see that for each of us our temperament and characteristics are as likely to be the result of our genes as of our experience. Some of you may well be the same way. A long time ago, I came to see just how serious some apparently carefree people were, and conversely, how humorous some serious people are.

If all this seems a little odd, it's simply a way into a theme. One I think to be of interest to those who are drawn to the life and words of Christ. It is something that is as essential to our personhood (and in that I include our souls) as greens are to our bodies, and that is paradox. Just as we do better if we can work up an appetite for greens as part of our diet, so we do well to develop an ear for paradox and the apparently absurd.

Let me remind you of the definition: paradox: that which is contrary to received opinion, which is apparently absurd but is, or may be, really true. We know so little, you and I; we understand so little. Fools don't generally know this, which is

perhaps why they strut about girded with certainties and non-negotiables (which can of course make them very popular). Wise people generally know how little they know, so that many of their conclusions and opinions will have a provisional character to them. The world (that includes you and me, remember) generally seeks certainties and is intolerant of provisional and tentative statements. It would be reassuring to say that 'religious' people are wise in this regard, but this is far from so.

Having an ear for paradox is an essential tool in this brief adventure we call life. Those of us calling ourselves Christian find it used in the New Testament, in the reported words of Jesus. 'He who loves his life will lose it; she who loses her life for my sake will find it'. 'Unless the seed dies, it cannot bear fruit'. 'The first shall be last and the last first'. 'Love those that hate you and pray for those that despitefully use you.' 'But it shall not be so among you: whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all'.

You will find these paradoxical and apparently absurd statements in all sorts of corners of our Christian tradition. And we find similar things in other writings, from other traditions, from Judaism to Zen. They seem to be saying 'look here, truth is really too simple to give to you straight – you'd miss the point'.

At certain times, for every one of us, we are likely to feel unhappy and stressed; torn and wearied by contradictions and pressures in the world at large and in our own personal worlds. An ear for paradox will not magic all those away, but may, on occasion, allow us to view things differently and so shape the choices we may make. It may also allow us to hear the call of a God who gives every indication of valuing the language of paradox as a default setting.

What has been important to me since I first identified as Christian is to experience the tensions and the fascination of being alive and of being human on the one side (what a friend of

mine always referred to as belonging to this 'dodgy species') and on the other, our being made in the image and likeness of God.

As a species we are surely dodgy, as is illustrated in the gospel reading we heard. Herod and his maladjusted dynasty are about as dysfunctional and mean as you can get. Between them we find greed, hatred, jealousy, murder, incest and abuse. An indulgent promise to grant any request to a flirtatious daughter leads to a moral crisis which Herod deals with by compliance, lest he lose face. Herod, his wife and his daughter and all their slimy chums reflect parts of our own selves. Let's not think for a moment that they do not.

Yet our human experience is that we can be more than this. We can behave justly and mercifully, as God's co-creators, un-enclaved to our egos and even, sometimes, managing to usher the insistent 'me' out of the room. An ear for paradox will make it easier for us to live within these tensions; and possibly even thrive on them, and ultimately to move beyond them.

And none of this need be a solely solitary occupation. We should foster *communities of paradox* - places where the sham of misplaced certainties is gently exposed, where disdain for those who are different is edged out by acceptance and appreciation, where young people (so often fresh in their estimate of the nonsense of aspects of the adult world) have an honoured place, as do the older ones who may (as so often they do) use their 'third age' to see things more clearly, and more generously. Such communities are life giving. They allow individuals to change, to apologise or confess, to receive love and forgiveness, to share and give, to grow, and to have fun together.

There is an aspect to all this that has been puzzling me, given the serial examples of corporate failure we hear so much about. It is this: is this kind of change - these forms of transformation which may be reached via paradox, which teach wisdom, which bring real, lasting, change - is this kind of change ever able to be *corporate*? Can it ever be undertaken by an organisation, a business, an institution, a regime, a government? Or is there something about it that can only operate within and through the human heart?

I wondered about this again recently when the TSB bank apologised for an IT problem that locked some of its customers out of their accounts, or gave them access to accounts they should not have seen. And again when the car manufacturer VW apologised for doctored emissions data. It reminded me of the time when Barclays Bank placed large advertisements in the press, saying how very sorry it was and that it would work 'tirelessly' to change after some of its staff were found to be involved in a rate-rigging scandal. I am doubtful that corporate repentance and apology is ever as transformative as when we make it as conscientious individuals.

Indeed, is it possible at all without a corresponding change of heart by all the people in such a corporate body? (And by the way, that national, corporate apology from Barclays was not without its paradoxical aspect: Barclay's Bank was founded by Quakers. When I joined the Society of Friends in my late teens, amongst the key texts I read was a famous defence of the Quaker approach to Christ written in the 1670s by a prominent Quaker called Robert Barclay, and known ever since as *Barclay's Apology*. It only goes to show, I suppose, that there are 'apologies' and 'apologies').

Can churches, I wonder, become *communities of paradox* in the way I described? Or synagogues, and temples and mosques? Perhaps not collectively, as national institutions, but perhaps as local communities, where relationships grow; where the apparent absurdity of paradox is realised *in relation to actual community* and as a means of growing community.

Can companies, governments, corporates and multi-nationals become communities like this? My, that would seem a tall order. Maybe the stuff of day-dreams. Some of these are surely too rigid, too sclerotic, too mired in historical collusions or unjust behaviours to make any such change possible. Or simply too large-scale.

Or might they turn to those paradoxical insights of the Gospel and elsewhere, those perennial paradoxes, and choose to lose their corporate lives in order to find new life, or even die in order to allow new birth? And what, I wonder, is our role in helping them do just that?

I began with mentioning a Living Will – or Advance Decision. In case you don't know, it is a

means of setting out any treatments that you don't want to have in the future, in case you later become unable to make or communicate decisions for yourself. They are free and easy to make, and if you have not done so, you might want to think about one. And more important as a priority is making a Will: apparently 60% of UK adults don't have one, risking all sorts of problems for those who remain. And as the gospels remind us, we never know when we shall meet our end.

In the meantime, we have our lives. Such a wondrous gift (and they remain wondrous even when we are suffering and struggling). We may encounter the odd Herod and Herodias along the way, and it makes sense to give them a wide berth. The greater sense, though, is to make our days count, by making sure that we never drift into living as if in a vegetative state. The danger of that is greater than we think, and in forms we might not immediately recognise. It's the very last thing the gospel calls us to. Amen.