



## faith in a time of trolls, bots and silos

Last weekend I took part in a day of what are called Thinkins. This device is used by all sorts of organisations – arts organisations, businesses – and in this case – a new journalism startup called Tortoise Media. The idea is to get away from a panel event where a few speakers debate in front of an audience, and to gather a group of people who say what they think about an issue – the point is to try to make the participation rate very high, no questions are allowed – straw polls are taken – your opinion is allowed to change and develop but you must express it. The overall aim is to try to think more slowly, less knee jerk, less driven by a voracious news cycle; and, like a tortoise, take some time to do what is described as slow news. Go deeper into an issue by first of all taking time to listen.

I was speaking at a Thinkin which was looking at the clash, or perceived clash between religious and secular rights. Two scenarios were cited. One, the protests that are continuing outside primary schools in Birmingham led by some Muslim campaigners and parents unhappy that their children are being introduced to the 'No Outsiders' programme, where families of different makeup, including parents of the same sex, feature as characters.

The other issue was of an actor who had been cast in a film the Color Purple to play a character that is played as a lesbian character, although this is not explicitly stated in the book. A Facebook post was unearthed from 2014 where she said that based on her own Christian faith, 'I do not believe homosexuality is right'. The theatre have sacked the actor. The actor is now suing the theatre.

Other questions were raised, such as the competing rights of people identifying as female being able to use the women only ponds on Hampstead Heath before they have had surgery – and this being in conflict with Muslim and other women who then stopped bathing there because modesty rules prevented them swimming in a

place that was not as far as they were concerned single sex.

Some very challenging opinions were aired by people who identified as religious and those also who had been very hurt by religion.

What interested me as part of this event was something that happened right at the beginning. The Thinkins are held often in the newsroom of Tortoise – in London – and sometimes they go on the road – in fact we've held one here at St James's on the relevance of the church in modern society. In the newsroom, it's a bustling place, and there are cameras everywhere – everything is streamed live, and also recorded, packaged for later transmission.

This was the only Thinkin of the day where the cameras were switched off. The only one. And it's because the secular news editors judged the theme of religion to be too sensitive to stream live. I was really struck by this sensitivity, and thought more than ever how important it is to gather together to practise our religion in an open and transparent way. And that the practise of religion can never be allowed to be privatised, to become disconnected from the light of debate and scrutiny by others. The discussion I was involved in got very heated and as the only public representative of the church there, I was rightly put under pressure about what was perceived to be the church's attitude towards sexuality, assisted dying, abortion, and equality.

Afterwards, the editors reflected this about our society, in the light of these heated discussions. And I thought it was so well expressed, I wanted to repeat it here.

*(We heard that ....) society has become more complex, creating more points of abrasion; because digital technology has driven us deeper into our echo chambers and made possible an ugly culture of anonymised abuse; and because interacting more and more by digital device,*

*rather than face to face, we are forgetting the art of social negotiation and trust-building.*

*There is no right not to be offended. And we must have the right to speak our minds. But there is no obligation to offend, either. We should, as the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has said, seek both to give and to take less offence. Tortoise editors 19 October 2019*

This thoroughly secular reflection put me in mind of Scripture's definition of love as love that does not take offence. But this teaching is lost in an atmosphere where religion is often seen, and of course often is, more part of the problem than part of the solution. Siloed ourselves, guilty of group- think, fighting for our rights before taking the time to listen hard to what others feel so deeply. It is a persistent paradox that in the 21st century, with all the scientific and philosophical knowledge at our disposal – that the world seems more furiously religious than ever.

And I'm afraid it's simply no longer credible for the church either to stick its fingers in its ears and pretend that we don't know things now that the writers of our Scripture couldn't possibly know – but it's also not a credible option for the church to just roll over in the face of the immense challenges of post modernity and become just another single issue campaign group, or yet another self help programme.

The vocation of the church is to point away from itself to Christ; the spacious, infinitely creative generative, forgiving presence of God in the world – in your inner soul and in mine – and in the universe we call our home.

To be part of church is exciting – it's energising, of course at times its infuriating and you might wish it was different from how it is and you're not here to like everyone here – that's not possible. But in terms of our vision of a just and beautiful society, we persistently gather – we physically gather to imagine a better world together – which is more counter cultural than we might think.

And our Scripture is incredibly energising and perplexing, and faces us with truths we have forgotten or don't dare to say in a secular society in case someone thinks we've gone a bit off piste. Scripture is thoroughly relevant when we take the time to wrestle with it – not just read it but grapple with it, learn to love it and listen deeply for its truth. And the spiritual muscles we exercise in grappling with its wisdom are

essential for deepening not just our knowledge but our wisdom as we work out how to live in the world.

We heard some incredible encouragement in the first lesson today which energises me.

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience...*

'Whether the time is favourable or unfavourable' – also translated sometimes as 'in season or out of season'. Never give up. And I love the thought of being 'solemnly urged' not to give up. That doesn't happen very often. But it sounds like something we should be doing more. And it is a message for our own day; when religion should not be trying – ever – to coerce or force – but always is in the mode that St Paul describes here – persuasion, debate, encourage, try to convince, rebuke when necessary - and all with the utmost patience. Play the long game he says – but play it with energy and urgency now.

And the brilliant parable that Jesus tells we heard in Luke's gospel. You'll have heard me say before; parables are really mini plays. Jesus draws great characters. In this one, he starts with a widow and a judge. Immediately we're off. In any patriarchal agriculturally based society, like 1st century Palestine, this widow is incredibly vulnerable. She is one of the most powerless people in society. But she absolutely refuses to be cast as that powerless person in that she consistently and persistently speaks up for justice. And that judge – what a great character he is – a bit supercilious, pleased with himself, probably enjoys a bit too much that people give him respect in the street or want him at their house. Doesn't properly respect people and has given up on God. Doesn't need God.

This woman, this apparently powerless voiceless woman is so persistent that she makes justice happen, in collaboration with this reluctant judge. Jesus's teaching methods are inventive here - he's painting a rather unattractive picture of this man – but one that his audience can relate to – but then saying, as he does elsewhere, well if this worked – just think how praying to a God

who is loving and just – just think what a difference that makes.

These Scriptures, the story told by Jesus and the advice written by Paul – have a similar theme that is absolutely relevant today for us as people who are trying to make our way in the world as people of faith.

Both of them urge people of faith to pray – as a way of entering into the patience and persistence asked of us.

Patience is not a quality we hear much about these days; it's often seen as a passive thing, with not enough agency. Don't wait we are told – go out and get what you want – the language of business is often about *driving up* profit say, or *driving down* costs – we *drill down* into the detail and deliver for the customer. All sounds pretty exciting – if a little violent for my taste - on one level but pretty exhausting on another.

The time in which we are asked to live as people of faith is deep time; we are asked to live in a spirit of what you might call 'revolutionary patience.' It's a deep patience that knows we don't have to do everything now; we don't procrastinate either – we live in the light of eternity, deeply aware of the creative presence of God in the world, that not everything depends on us to get it all right and do it all now.

This kind of revolutionary patience, that expects and prays for change, for justice, for peace, like the widow – and like St Paul urges, in season and out of season – this kind of revolutionary patience is restful. We realise with a choking relief, that it doesn't all depend on us to get it right.

And in a society where we are siloed and where we make God's love and mercy too narrow to suit our own purposes, we turn a corner if we persist along the road of prayer - and suddenly come out into a huge love like the ocean or the night sky, within which the tortuous anxieties and sickening worries that occupy our minds most days can be put down and given over.

I spent some time recently with a man who gets paid for sex. He can make good money in a day but if he does do a day of this, working from a rented flat in Birmingham, advertised on a website, then he needs time to recover afterwards. In some ways he feels very lost. Used. Addicted. Although never to drugs. It became apparent that he, also being a Muslim and a transvestite, although he is clear he is not

transgender, his vulnerability economically and socially is of a similar level to the widow described in Jesus's story. I was incredibly moved by the kindness and humour of this man, and heard in his conversation his persistence in wanting to make something of his life, trying to find someone to love; his persistence in wanting to connect, wanting to make friends, wanting to help other people. From deep within his incredibly precarious circumstances, I met a man who was indescribably alive. I heard in his conversation a persistent voice wanting connection and love - that would not be silenced, or put down. And in his kind eyes, I learned something about what it might be like to pray persistently like the widow. Time with him encouraged me to pray in a way I can't quite explain.

It's really easy, given so much division and fractiousness, given the prejudice that is dressed up as passionate free speech, given the wreckage left by some religious practice in the lives of people who identify as lesbian or gay or trans or bisexual, for example, or the damage done to people whose lives turn out to be complicated through divorce or abortion or prison or debilitating illness. It's really easy to want to give up on faith or God. Or say that the inner troll we all carry around should just be allowed to carry on abusing and yelling and standing up for its right to say what it likes.

As the Tortoise editors reflected further;

*It has become orthodox to interpret the present state of the nation in terms of inevitable decline and discord. That polarisation is here to stay. That the digital public square is nasty. That we're in for more trolls and more bots, peddling fakery and hatred.*

*But only if we let it. This is not our first re thinking of mass communication, political organisation or personal dignity. Tortoise editors October 2019*

My experience over the past months has led me down a different path – I can't 'let it' be in its current polarised state. And I want to offer our own church vocation in the context of our Scripture for today and in the baptism promises that we heard last week at Brecon's baptism.

Persistently, courageously, we will continue to say in season and out of season that we turn to Christ. And that cosmic eternal Christ that we turn to, rooted in the prophet and poet Jesus, is an inexhaustible source of love, and acceptance

and call to peace. The more we need, the more we can have. And that this deep love of justice and compassion rooted in Christ will give us the energy not to retreat into a privatised Christian silo of self congratulation, or a sense that we should just give up, because frankly it's too hard.

This prayerful persistence, which we must continue to articulate publicly is not easy – and actually not that easy for a community like this one – where a lot of us – you - don't really want to be tub thumpers or thought of as proselytising trying to convert others to our point of view.

But we must keep going with energy and love.

And just in case there is any doubt, it's so important to keep saying publicly, persistently, without fear, that in amongst all the noise of trolls and competing rights, we will keep saying persistently, without fear, that you and I are made, beautifully made and loved as we are – whatever our sexuality, ethnicity, gender fluidity, non binary identity, whatever our emotional, mental or physical health. Whatever we have done in the past, however deep our shame.

And that while of course we want to disagree well, and love without limits, that doesn't mean that we will stop saying to our Christian brothers and sisters who reject people who are gay, for example, that we will confront and challenge that view as long as this church stands and as long as this community gathers at this altar.

Tolerance is not enough. Love and mercy are more our kind of thing.

Turning to Christ will mean that as we do so, we see that Christ is invariably not far up above us on a throne – but kneeling, attempting to wash our feet – and as it says so many times in Scripture, looking at us and loving us and asking us 'what do you want me to do for you?'

In today's world, I genuinely think we have no option but to keep looking energetically for ways to say that this persistent, emotionally intelligent, yes tolerant, creative, merciful and inclusive Christian faith is possible; that our Scriptures are beautiful and challenging and that we love them; that the Eucharist gives us a vision of the future where all are welcome and all are fed; and that as in the gospel, the poorest among us are the ones who teach us that kind of persistence, because the poorest among us know what it is to have to have that kind of persistence. In prayer and in life.

Let us remember our baptism and turn to Christ, repent of our sins and renounce evil.

Persistently.

Without fear, and in the cause like the widow, of justice.

Amen.