

## **Responding in Faith: Sermon for Lent 2 March 8th 2009 – Robert Innes**

In the north of Brussels near the Atomium and the King Boudwijn stadium, you can find Belgium's largest water park: Oceade. I wonder if you have been there? It boasts no less than 11 slides. There's the 140 metre long Cyclone; and there's the breathtakingly fast hurricane, where you can slide 80 metres in just 7 seconds. But my favourite slide is the cannon ball. A little more daring than the others perhaps, this one features a one metre vertical drop above the swimming pool. You come down the slide at top speed. Then the slide ends, leaving you in mid-air. Just for a few moments you are suspended in mid-air. You have left the slide. But how ever much flail your arms and legs there's nothing you can do until you plummet into the water. It is a strange experience. Leaving behind the security of the slide. But not yet arriving in the water.

Now that picture of leaving one thing behind, and just hovering for a while before arriving at a new destination is an intriguing one. Because it seems to me that many of the most important experiences in life have exactly that same character: of having left behind one set of familiar circumstances, but not yet having arrived at new place of stability. A famous Scotsman called Victor Turner called them liminal experiences: being 'betwixt and between'. Let me give you some examples. There's the time when a baby is born – between leaving the mother's womb and being welcomed into the family and given a name. There's the first time a child goes to school, standing at the gate for the first time, leaving the family but not yet part of the class. The time a young person goes off to college – leaving the security of home but not yet part of the student body. There is marriage of course: leaving your parents and setting out with a life partner. There is the experience of retirement. There is the decision to return from Brussels to one's home country. And lastly the experience of dying. The moment when we leave the human community, and set out for whatever lies beyond. Now whether you are secular or religious these experiences are nearly always marked by some kind of ceremony: the naming or baptism of a baby; the college matriculation; the wedding ceremony (civil or religious), the presentation of gifts on retirement; the funeral for someone who has died.

Those are the big liminal events; the big transition events that mark our lives. But for many of us here at Holy Trinity, the experience of liminality, of being betwixt and between is much more pervasive. There is the time between leaving your home country and feeling settled in your new country. How long is that: a year? Two years years? Never? Then there's the question of joining a church. Do I really belong here in this strange and fragile community of Holy Trinity: am I a part of it? Will I ever feel a part of it?

Indeed at the present time, there are many of us who feel an additional sense of being in a period of transition, on the edge. The financial crisis lessens, for many of us, our security in our workplaces. Will they keep me? Am I going to be made redundant? And where will I ever find work? Personally I wonder whether our western culture is moving *en bloc*, into a kind of betwixt and between state. The mountains of debt are staggeringly large. Unrestrained free market capitalism has failed. Yet we don't yet know what might replace it. We don't yet have a clear vision for how the world's commercial life will be structured and governed in the future.

Liminal places are scary places. They raise our anxiety levels. And within this community, there is a relatively high level of anxiety at the moment. Yet, these liminal places are spiritually crucial places. Because they are the places above all where genuine human transformation and growth takes place. Abraham and Sarah in the wilderness; Joseph in the pit; the people of Israel in the desert; Jonah in the belly of the whale – the Bible seems to focus on these kinds of experiences, because they are most especially the places where people change.

I've been introduced recently to the writings of the Catholic spiritual author Richard Rohr. And Rohr says of this betwixt and between kind of place: "it is the unique spiritual position where human beings hate to be, but God is always leading them. It is when you have left the tried and true, but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. When you are between your old comfort zone and any possible new avenues."

I'm sure that is an experience you will know well, and are quite possibly living through at this moment. And the question is: how do we use profitably these kinds of experiences. They are the most significant experiences in our lives: but how do we live through them fruitfully? Some try to reason their way out. Add up the credits and subtract the debits. Make a plan. Make lots of different plans. Rationalise it all. Others find someone to blame. "Why did they persuade me to move to this stupid country? How could they be so unsupportive? Why is this church so unfriendly? Why can't they understand me? But the most fruitful way is to try to hold the anxiety, to live with the ambiguity, to entrust the situation and to wait. It is what the biblical writers call living by faith.

There's no getting around it. There is a big distinction between living by faith and living without faith. The Romanian historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade made a famous distinction between those who live in sacred space and those who live in profane space. In profane space, all options are equally valid. We are who we choose to be. There is nothing worthy of our ultimate trust, beyond ourselves. My life and my ego are at the centre. Sacred space, on the other hand, grounds our life in one undeniable reference point. We call this reference point 'God'. Sacred space gives our lives a compass bearing. It aligns us with a strong, 'magnetic north'. Sacred space situates me with a reference outside my own ego, outside my own passing feelings, outside the mood of the surrounding culture. Sacred space gives us a base from which we can move into the world, from which we can give ourselves to others, with security and with true perspective.

If we live in profane space how do we cope in the hard times, in the liminal times? There are a number of strategies one could choose. Buy more things. Lose oneself in the comforts of retail therapy. And to be sure, the experience of purchasing can make us feel significant: those sales assistants take me seriously! Or work harder. The work ethic teaches us of the virtue of diligence. Although if we're in a hole, then digging harder isn't necessarily the best way to get out. Or again we may drink more alcohol. Dull the pain. And finally and especially for ex-pats, we may choose to travel more. Take more exotic holidays, search for somewhere that feels like home, try to find that physical location that will make us feel a sense of peace and of pleasure.

But all of these seem like strategies of avoidance. What the person who lives in sacred space understands, is that we need a secure place to stand, a need a quiet, still place where we can be confident of who we are, confident in whom we trust...even and especially when everything going on around us is changing and in flux. And that place isn't found in the shops, or in the restaurants, or the travel brochures...it is found in a relationship with God, and it is known in faith.

“Be still and know that I am God”, says the psalmist. It is counter-intuitive. We can, if we are not careful, very easily find ourselves rushing around like headless chickens believing that we could solve the problems if only we were smarter or more hard-working. But in situations of difficulty, and anxiety and stress the spiritual answer is not to do more but to trust more and to pray more.

Here in Church House, we start the morning praying together. It's a great privilege of course, to be able to start work with prayers. But I can say without any doubt that it has brought us through some very difficult times. It may be that during Lent you too could get into a pattern of prayer. You probably won't be able to pray with others – although your welcome to come and join us on Wednesday mornings at 9am. But if you want to pray by yourself and you are looking for a place to start, check out the Holy Trinity church web-site. There on right hand side of our home page, you can click on the daily prayer feed. And you'll find updated each day, an order of prayer for morning, evening and night. Isn't modern technology wonderful! So even if you are in a thoroughly secular office, well you might be able to grab a few minutes of sacred space, in the morning or at lunchtime.

I'm always amazed at how many good churchgoing folk don't pray. I mean how can you be in contact with God who is the very source of our lives if you never spend dedicated time in his presence? Are you someone who, first thing in the morning logs on to the internet or news service to check the Dow Jones index, the foreign exchange rates and the weather? Or do you start the day in prayer? That's a good spiritual test.

Romans 4:16, our NT reading, refers to the *promise of God* which comes by *faith*. If there is one overarching theme that unites all the books in the Old Testament and the New Testament it is the promise of God, his promise to bring human beings new life. The promise to Abraham that he would have a son; the promise to the Israelites that they would be rescued from Egypt and have a homeland of their own, the promise that a saviour would one day come to his people, the promise that the Gentiles would be included in that salvation, and finally the promise of Jesus to us his followers that we would have life and life in all its fulness. To live in sacred space, is to claim this promise for ourselves, to respond in faith to an offer of real, purposeful life. To place our trust in God.

Well I began by describing the experience of sliding down the canon ball slide at the Oceade water park, and the unique sensation of coming off the end of the slide and hanging for a few moments in mid-air before hitting the water. The thing about those few moments, of course, and what makes them scary, is that you are no longer in control. How ever much you flail your arms and legs around it doesn't make any difference. You just have to wait for gravity to pull you down into the water.

In the spiritual life, the opposite of being in control, is not being out of control, it is being in God. As an old saying puts it: “let go and let God.” For very many of us these dislocating, scary, liminal experiences are, if we could see it, opportunities to do precisely this. Jesus says: “whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” There is no verse which is closer to the centre of Jesus spiritual teaching than this verse. Is it a verse, I wonder, which you and I have begun to understand and begun to live?

Let me close with some words from a hymn by George Matheson:

“O love that will not let me go.  
I rest my weary soul in thee.  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
that in its ocean depths,  
its flow might richer, fuller be.”