

Rowan Williams, Faith in the Public Square

St Mary le Strand, April 5th 2016

Thank you very much indeed Philip, and thank you for the invitation, and thank you all very much indeed for coming. I'll try not to talk for too long so that we have some genuine conversation of the kind advertised because it seems to me there are few things more annoying than people monologuing about dialogue. So I shall do my very best to allow some real exchange.

And the subject I have been given of course is vast and unmanageable, so what you'll have is only a very sketchy set of possible prods and prompts to further reflection. And essentially what I really want to talk about today is something to do with what the church is expected to be and do in our society based on the conviction that, contrary to what a lot of people imagine, there is still a remarkably high level of expectation around, even if that's only shown sometimes in the depth of disappointment people sometimes express in the church as it actually is. So that's a prompt to think about what the space is in the popular mind that the church occupies. What are we meant, as a church, to be doing, or showing, or saying or whatever? And however unsatisfactorily or unevenly we fulfil that, nonetheless, we have to be intelligently aware of how that works in our society. That's one dimension.

Another I think is to look at the question 'What aspects of our society are, and are not, secular in the various senses that word has acquire?' Because I think we're in a great muddle about the meaning of the secular. We use it mean all sorts of things. The media use it to mean all sorts of things and I think we need to think rather harder about what we actually mean by that word: what is positive and what's negative about it.

I had the rather taxing experience a couple of months ago of speaking about the positive

aspects of the secular in Doha at the Institute of Islamic Studies there and that's not an exercise I would recommend, as there is rather a strong sense there that the secular is a swear word.

And in all that, and around all that, a set of concerns and anxieties that have to do in our culture more broadly with what I'll express as the question 'How are we mended as individuals and societies?' How are we mended?

Because people talk quite freely and quite extensively about our brokenness and the more they do that the more it seems the question of what mending, reconciliation, wholeness might mean, and how those questions arise.

So, let's have a look at some of those in slightly more detail. And can I also, before I go any further, check whether or not I am audible. If I stop being audible will you please, if you want to hear any more, let me know?

Well, let me begin then with a few thoughts on the definition of the secular. This is a question that I have a look at in one or two bits of the book you've heard mentioned and one of my earliest attempts to define what I meant by the secular is in one of the early chapters of the book. And it suggests that part of the secular mindset is bound up with a feeling that we can actually master our environment; that we can actually answer its questions and part of what therefore constitutes the sacred in society is a sense that the person or the environment that we confront is always going to escape our categories and our control; that the person I relate to is always looking at somewhere other than myself. That the situation that I'm engaging with is always involved with factors and realities more than myself, my agenda, my will. But I don't say that simply to be unkind about the secular, because as I'll say later on, I don't think we need to be, but I do think there's something important in asking what the essential character of recognising sacredness has to do with. And for me it's again and again that sense that what I confront relates to more than me. And, as a believer of a certain kind, I would say relates to more than the sum total of all of us at the end of the day - but that's another story.

So that, part of the function of a faith community in a contemporary society, and particularly a contemporary secular society, is to hold onto a picture of persons, cultures, situations, for that matter, of the whole material order, that presupposes that they relate to something more than me and even something more than us as a human race.

That's to say we're here to keep open, let's put it simply, a window into the depth, the inexhaustible depth of the world we're in and the people we encounter. Part of our sacred trust as a community of faith is again and again to

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say this person, this situation, this culture is not exhausted by the concepts, the structures, the plans and the policies around us. We keep open a window into *depth*.

Now a good many people who wouldn't describe themselves as religious and who probably would want to call themselves secular might well object that they're not at all hostile to that, and that's wonderful. But insofar as this keeping open a window, this sense of the sacred inescapable around us, insofar as that requires us to step back a bit from our assumptions about rational control and the exact quartering of the world in a problem solving way, I think there is some necessary pushback against a secular framework.

But I also argued in the book that there's a perfectly benign and positive sense you might want to give to the word secular. And that's to do with the fact that in a complex society of very diverse values and convictions, power is not exercised on behalf of any one religious community. The power of the state is there to hold the ring. To make sure that there is a properly articulate, responsible, brokered conversation between the different communities of conviction that make up a complex society. And if secular means that, I don't think we should have any real problem with it. That's to say, there has to be some distance between the sense of the sacred and the aspiration for social power. Most religious communities have got this spectacularly wrong over the centuries and many still do. But it is, I think, the difference

between saying that there ought to be an expectation that the church or some other faith community sets the agenda for society from the top and I think the right expectation that the church and other faith communities should have an unembarrassed voice in public discussion even when they don't win the vote. Sometimes we confuse effective witness with winning arguments. Sometimes religious people lose argument. You may have noticed. And I think we have to live with that in the complex society that we actually inhabit. Reality check.

So, a good sense of the secular insofar as it implies that distance between power and control and the sense of the depth around us. And the less benign side of the secular which tries to close off, to instrumentalise and finish off the business of understanding our human world, and indeed our non-human world as well.

A hospitable space for those dimensions of our humanity that don't easily fit into reduced accounts of the human.

And as I say, I suspect that that is one of the things that the culture around us still expects us to be interested in. And I'll quote for the umpteenth time something that was said to me years ago rather wonderfully by a former student of mine, now the very distinguished incumbent of St Mary Abbots

when he defined the church as the place where people are allowed to put the stuff that won't go anywhere else. And that sense of the church as a hospitable space for those dimensions of our humanity that doesn't easily fit into reduced, narrowed accounts of the human, that surely is one of the things that remains a deeply serious, deeply positive expectation. Where else can I say this? Where else can I *feel* this or admit that I'm feeling this? Where else, never mind the details of doctrine and conviction, but where else is my creative uncertainty about the limits of my humanity allowed to be expressed? And if we are, as a church community, still able to keep that alive I think we are forming one of our major tasks in our society.

After all, it does say in our scriptures that in Christ is a new creation which to me is one of the most signal and decisive images in the whole of Christian scripture. A new creation, that is a

world, a framework and environment that is larger than we expected to find. More capacious than other versions of humanity around. And while Christians quite rightly get involved in public debates about ethics and so forth, the danger of foregrounding that too much in a certain way is that we end up with a cultural environment that is pretty sure what Christians don't like but not all all sure what they do. A cultural environment in which the message is repeatedly, the church makes the world that little bit smaller rather than that little bit larger. And I don't say that as a judgement on any particular stance or any particular issue. I've, in my time, fought one or two of these battles, notably over assisted dying legislation in the House of Lords, where we may or may not win that argument in the long run. And I would fight that battle again. But my caution comes in when I realise that that can be one more brick in the wall on which is written 'Christians don't like this', giving only a limited sense of what they're for.

So, a tightrope there and not one I ever found it easy to negotiate and not one I ever negotiated successfully but I think you'll see the prime point I'm trying to make. If there is an expectation around it is very often there will be room here. There will be room.

So, that's something to do with the sense of the sacred that is expected of us. The keeping a window open to the depths, the leaving of room for the stuff that won't go anywhere else.

I think though that there's another thing that, more or less explicitly, quite a lot of people in society as still look to us for. And that takes me back to experiences in South Wales when I was a bishop there twenty odd years ago. At a time of very considerable economic hardship and South Wales is about to enter yet another phase of extreme economic hardship and I can't not have that in mind today. But I remember conversations I had in Ebbw Vale and the upper valleys at that time of high unemployment, general social destitution and dissolution and people saying, well, we expect the church to be there on behalf of the people nobody else speaks for.

Again, a story I've told before and I apologise to those of you who've heard it. In the era of the last coal mine closures in South Wales, I got a little bit involved with the great Tyrone O'Sullivan,

then Lodge Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers at Tower Colliery, and the great project of the employees' buy-out of Tower Colliery. This redundant colliery ran successfully as a workers' cooperative for many years after the last of the other mines closed down. But I turned up at one of the meetings about the future of Tower to be greeted with these words by Tyrone: "Very nice to see the church here, about 90 years too late, but never mind". But he and others in the National Union of Mineworkers at that time would often say, "The unions are here to speak for workers' interests, we know that. We also know that there are quite a lot of people around, on the edges of this, who don't have people to speak for them – and that's your job".

I was told, in so many words, repeatedly by people in that world, that's your job, as church.

So the second area where I think we have expectation, creative expectation around us, is that we should as people of faith, be willing not only to open up windows into the depths, but also to ask the question, whose depths are not being attended to? Into whose lives are there no windows in our public discourse? Or to put it into plainer English, who's being forgotten here? Who's not here in this conversation, in this discussion? Who's not here? Whose voice is not audible, not taken seriously. And the 'who's not here' question applies in quite a wide range of settings. It applies painfully and obviously in respect of what ethnic communities in a multi-ethnic community are not here. It applies, and my goodness we've made a mess of this, it applies in terms of the sexual other, whether it's women, or people of minority sexual orientation, transgender persons or whatever.

Who's not here? We have to ask that question as people of faith whatever ethical answer we might want to talk about elsewhere, we still have to recognise that's one of the absences.

To speak for the people on the edges who don't have people to speak for them...whose voice is not audible, not taken seriously?

And there's another absence which is quite sharp and poignant for the churches these days.

And it connects with a remark made by that wonderful Roman Catholic lay theologian, Donald

Nicholl, when he pointed out with his characteristic, wide-eyed innocence that most theologians throughout the ages had done their job in the absence of children. That St Thomas Aquinas was not actually troubled by who was changing the nappies or who was cooking the food. The absence of children, and because we know better than we've known for a long time, just how deeply the church can be an unsafe environment for children, we have to handle that issue with the greatest candour, the greatest self-awareness possible. But it's one of those things which we need to hold onto. Who's not here? Whose voice is not being allowed, not taken seriously? As I say, that can be to do with race, gender, age, and that of course means the elderly as well as the very young, it can vary from community to community. But it does seem to me that one of the questions that any reasonable, self-aware, reflective Christian community always ought to be asking in any public discussion, is 'What are the voices we're not hearing here?'. Which is why I was very pleased indeed, even before the vote in favour of women bishops in the Synod, that a number of senior women clergy were invited into the deliberations and discussion of the House of Bishops, among other things, as a simple reminder of a voice that was not officially registered.

To say what a well-lived life looks like... A mended life, a life that has coped with the fractures and failures of actual human existence.

So, an expectation to do with taking seriously, with the windows into the depths; an expectation around a capacity to speak for and, more importantly perhaps, to listen to voices otherwise silenced or absent. But I mentioned also in my introductory remarks the question which I expressed as 'How are we mended?' Put more positively, what's the positive vision of the human good that we're working with? Some of you will remember the book by Robert and Edward Skidelsky that appeared a few years ago, '*How much is enough?*', which argued that our obsession with an entirely external and mechanical measure of economic growth had distracted our attention disastrously from any question of what a good human life

looked like. What does the life well-lived actually look like? We need models. We need narratives of that. We need, in the jargon, hagiology, that is we need a science of good lives, holy lives, mended lives. We need to be able to say, this is what we think a human life looks like when it's working at full stretch. When it's fulfilling what it's capable of. Not a shiny, polished super man or super woman ideal, but a mended life, a life that has coped with the fractures and failures of actual human existence, yet not closed itself up. A life that goes on, perhaps mysteriously, being an agent of hope or of mending in its environment, for all its own flaws and fractures. So I think we need good stories. Again to repeat something I've said many times, when people ask, so how do you begin to communicate the faith, my answer tends to be, "Well let me tell you about X, Y and Z. Let me tell you what a life might look like that has some claim to be mended. Not perfect, not polished, not flawless or sinless, but mended, managing and therefore being a vehicle for something hopeful, communicating possible meaning".

And of course not everybody, so to speak, signs up for that. If you tell the story of some great life of faith somebody may very well say "Well that's very impressive, but I don't know that I believe what they believe". And, that's fine. But it's the beginning of the conversation. Just the kind of conversation I think that, Philip, you want to encourage.

So if that is what a mended life might look like, let's think about how that is reproducible, intelligible how it can be thought through and worked for in your own environment, locally, nationally, globally: how are we mended? How do we move from the failure and the flaw, towards some kind of humanity that is not completely paralysed by resentment, by fear, by the urge to control, by the terror of the other, the stranger?

If we're talking about faith in the public square, those are some of things I believe we, I'm speaking as priest and bishop obviously here, we, within the church, need to be reflecting on. And we need, therefore, to be uncomfortably aware of the various ways in which our structures and our habits as church get in the way of that.

I have already indicated some of them. We give off the message that we are most deeply preoccupied with what we're against. We give off the message, perhaps subliminally sometimes, that what we would really like is to be in charge because we know best. We give off the message that the mended or the holy life is some kind of unobtainable, timeless, flawless perfection. And we need, again and again, to be brought down to earth.

We ourselves, of course, become complicit in silencing various kinds of voices. Having talked about people of other races, people of other sexual orientation from the majority, about children, or about women, then again, we have to face the fact that as a matter of bare history, the church has very often been complicit in all those ways. I say that, not to load the church with unmanageable levels of guilt, but as a basic requirement of truthfulness and realism. We don't have a lot in the bank in terms of credibility for a lot of people, and we just need to bear that in mind.

And coming up out of all of that, is I think the very, again, simple and basic question, "How do we convey that we can be trusted with people's most awkward and sensitive and uncomfortable spiritual aspirations or searchings? How do we convey that we can be trusted with all that? That we are indeed a hospitable space in that sense. I don't, I hasten to add, have any quick fixes there. But it's the question I want to keep somewhere in the conversation about all this.

And just to finish with two or three vignettes and a tiny bit of theology. And actually, two of these little pictures come from the last few days. I had the wonderful pleasure of spending a couple of days in Cornwall at the weekend, at the St Endellion Music Festival. And looking at a packed church listening to Bach's B Minor Mass in church, with a prayer and meditation beforehand, and Compline sung in the church afterwards, attended by quite a lot of the audience. I thought, well I doubt whether I, or anybody in this group, has a very clear sense of what's going on, but there's evidently, in this group of several hundred people, a rather strong sense that there is something here that is not to be found elsewhere. And whether it's the B Minor Mass or

something more modest or indeed more contemporary, that's a picture which I want to hold on to. That dramatic unfolding of a story of disaster and mending, of glory and struggle. That remains a narrative and pictorial context in which many people find space for what doesn't go elsewhere. For us, as Christians, it's more than just the narrative and the picture. Something about the very fabric of reality, but that's for another day perhaps. Anyway, that's one picture from recent days.

The second is a conversation, a more private conversation, with a relatively well known writer and journalist who spoke to me in recent days about what it meant for them to return very cautiously and very, almost unwillingly, to some kind of practice of Christian faith. And what this person said was that confronting and reflecting upon the acute violence of our world, including the acute religiously linked violence, had made them sense the lack of some place to stand, some perspective from which to view and structure experience. And this person felt that they were being inexorably drawn back into some kind of Christian commitment which they weren't too sure how to express yet but to do exactly with that feeling of needing a vocabulary and a framework in which fuller justice could be done, to both the evils and glories of human nature, than would otherwise be the case.

So there are pictures, there are hints here and there of what it might be for us to live as a community of faith in this kind of world with these kind of expectations. Contrary to various voices of doom, while I hardly feel complacent about the future of the institutional church, I feel immensely hopeful and positive about the future of the Gospel and the community of faith, with a profound conviction that all I have talked about today is both both possible and real in our environment. It can be done. It can be transformingly done. And, praise God, there are plenty of places where it is being done.

But my final bit of theology is to come back to that new creation that I mention, that I touched on earlier on.

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old has passed away. Look, the new has arrived”, says St Paul.

What does he mean by this? That somehow the events at the heart and beginning of the church’s life, the events that we have been celebrating and are celebrating at this Easter season, have changed the horizon of human life. Things are now possible for human beings that were not. That is the fact upon which we rest our legitimacy as a church, as a community of belief. Things are now different and we can say with another level of confidence or clarity to the world around, it really doesn’t have to be like this. Not just as an aspirational remark: “try harder and we might make it better”. But it really doesn't have to be like this because it isn't like this. And, mounting the Easter pulpit for the moment, what Easter says to us is, it is already not like this. Our humanity is already opened up, transfigured. Already reconciled, already mended. Our struggle is not somehow to drag ourselves up to a level of mendedness and managing, but to come to terms with the fact that the work has been done and we’re living into its depths. And that’s why we talk about faith. Faith, not as in the general modern sense of lots of specifically religious points of view, but faith as a trust so radical that we constantly find it hard to catch up with. A trust that a difference has been made. And we live out of that. And live it out for that world which needs to know something about its depths, which needs to know something about the people it forgets, which needs to know something about mending.

Thank you.