

RISK, THE GOSPEL AND CULTURE

Advent Lecture, given by Rt. Revd John Packer

Ripon Cathedral, 30.11.09 – St Andrew

Last Wednesday I had the privilege of taking part in a memorial event for Baroness Chapman of Leeds at Elland Road. It was an occasion to celebrate risk. Nicky Chapman has been among those who have passionately worked for the rights of the disabled. The Equalities Bill which is wending its way through Parliament at the moment has a section on the obligations of taxi drivers to take passengers who are disabled and those clauses are dedicated to Nicky; based on her own experience of taxis which would not take the risk of picking up a disabled, wheelchair-bound person. More important, Baroness Chapman demonstrated the embracing of risk in her own life. She was 2' 9" tall: always in her wheelchair: needing permanent carers: only alive because her parents had fought for her against the wishes of the medical profession at the time of her birth. When it was suggested in 2004 that she should become one of the 'people's peers' most advised her against: it would be simply impossible to get to and from Leeds to London: she suffered from brittle bones which were frequently breaking: it would shorten her life. It almost certainly did. She died in August at the age of 48. She was prepared to risk her life for the cause in which she believed and which she exemplified.

The event was a risk too for the church. It was one of those curious occasions which we all know where you were not at all sure whether it was an act of Christian worship or not. We sang All things bright and beautiful, And did those feet in ancient times, Here we go with Leeds United we're gonna give the boys a hand: there were prayers, but Nicky was not a Christian and that was reflected in the secular music and tributes. After the event I wandered around the refreshment tent. Most people were appreciative and friendly, sharing memories and experiences, but in a corner two people were involved in what looked a tense, animated discussion about what we had been doing. I went and joined them, which at least had the effect of turning their critique on me. One argued strongly that the Christian presence was inappropriate. Nicky was not a Christian. Why should the church muscle in on an event to commemorate her? The other was a committed Christian. "That was a lost opportunity", he said. "You had a hall full of non-Christians and you failed to preach the gospel". It was an intriguing pair of challenges on which to reflect.

In the end I believe it was appropriate for the churches to spend a good deal of time and energy working with Leeds United Disabled Organisation (LUDO) to establish an appropriate way to mark Nicky's life and a risk well worth taking. I also believe that it was a time for the gospel to be modelled rather than verbally proclaimed, but I hear the critiques and I wonder.

The theme for tonight's address was partly chosen because it is one which challenges me continually – how to encourage and express risk in a risk-averse culture: and partly because of two discussions reported to me. One was about innovation in liturgy, and an

2/ attempt to open up a family Eucharist to real participation by children. Change was allegedly blocked by the comment, 'but what will the bishop say?', and my informant said, 'the trouble is, John, that you do not realise how much people fear what the bishop might say or do.' The second was a comment made on behalf of clergy from minority ethnic backgrounds – not specifically in this diocese. We were discussing why it is that so few clergy from those backgrounds move to positions of senior responsibility in the church and the comment was, 'Well we have learned to keep our heads down and not to make waves'. To which someone added, 'that is why we have so few clergy from those congregations in the first place!'

The church ought to be a place where we take risks and discover the consequences. Yet we live in a risk-averse culture where the response to mistakes is not to forgive but to seek redress. So we become desperate to ensure that there can be no possible threat to children: we take them to school by car and teachers will no longer take them on outward bound courses. When they do, and something goes wrong, there is an outcry.

We have a government which responds to problems by producing another law and a quango to deal with it: so we are told we need absolute clarity as to when those involved in the tragedy of assisted suicide should be prosecuted: we need to ban cigarette machines in pubs. Social workers in particular feel more and more constrained by the over-reaction to error; so that every day in our newspapers there is a reaction of distress, horror and blame at a mistake made by a doctor, a nurse, a social worker or a teacher.

I reflect on the times when we as a family have taken in children for a period where their own family was in chaos in order to relieve stress and provide space and opportunity for renewal of family life – and I wonder whether we would now do it.

And in the church some argue that we as clergy need to hold on to our freeholds – those of us who have them – in order to protect ourselves from bishops and may be congregations. The normal provisions of employment law are not enough for us, apparently. We need more than that to protect us. I look forward to surrendering my freehold when the new Terms and Conditions of Service legislation permits me to do so. Surely we do not need that protection in a church which should accept and welcome risk. I think of an ordinand, not in this diocese, who last year attempted to sue their diocese for not finding them the curacy they craved. We live in a church as well as a society where mistakes are not forgiven; their perpetrators are sued.

And that lack of any sense of forgiveness lies I believe at the heart of what is becoming a harsh and nervous society. A distressed and helpless mother who harms her child is described as the face of evil – a face made by God in his own image. Her social worker is sacked. But it must not be so among you.

3/ The Andrew story of the feeding of the 5,000 in John 6 makes this a particularly powerful theme for today. Only John is interested in exploring the theme of the child's lunch. Andrew does not believe Jesus can do anything about it – five loaves and two fish. What are they among so many? He is just as cynical as Philip – it won't work. But he lets Jesus have a go, and that needs to inform and encourage our ministry. I wonder if others were as surprised as I confess I was at getting the raising of Lazarus as the gospel for All Saints' Day this year. On re-reading that story I was struck not only by Jesus' deep emotion, but also by his risk-taking. He has to place himself in the Father's hands for the potentially catastrophic results of failure – Father, I thank you for having heard me. And the culminating words of freedom – unbind him and let him go. The incarnation is itself the ultimate piece of risk-taking as God in Christ embraces the frailty of human nature and experience.

So I believe that we need to seize that understanding of Christian forgiveness, of God's way of bringing good out of times of crisis and his vision for possibilities beyond our faith. Then we shall be open to risk-taking in the service of gospel.

And yet..... there does need to be a distinction between risk and foolhardiness. I was in Liverpool when the initial work had to be done on CRB checks. We did not have a bishop of Liverpool at the time, so I had to take responsibility for the checks. There was a considerable outpouring of resentment. A number of permissions to officiate were returned – one which I remember well with the words, 'if you trust me so little I do not want to minister in your diocese'. I confess to some sympathy at the time with that sentiment. I am now a convert. I believe the system has proved its worth. I know something of abuse prevented. I believe the CRB system to be a right defence of all of us for our ministry.

So there is a right caution in defence of the most vulnerable, but for the most part we need to defy the culture of blame and security and take risks for the gospel. That will involve failure – without failure there can be no risk. It will also bring excitement and enthusiasm. I was reading the other day of Don Robins' development of St George's Crypt and the warnings and criticism he received from the congregation of St George's. His memorial is the immense contribution of the Crypt to the life of the most needy in Leeds for over half a century. There is risk and excitement in the appointment of Rob Hinton as our Chaplain for the Business Community in Leeds. There is risk in the development of St Mary Harrogate as a network church. There are risks in café church and cell church. If you want to criticise it is easy to do so. We need to defy the critical, suspicious and risk-averse culture and do what we can to create opportunities for the gospel.

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Every traditional Christian practice was once a risky innovation. The Authorised version of the bible and the 1662 Prayer Book are two obvious examples. Holy Communion celebrated westwards would be another within the memory of many of us. Kitchens to serve the needs of our churches and communities. The sharing of church buildings with minority ethnic churches which is now so much a part of the life of Leeds. Rural churches opened to tourists, schools, pilgrims: now far more open to the enquirer than once they were. Services at Semerwater Lake or Boxing Day walks to Fountains – now firmly part of the tradition: very recently risk-taking innovations.

So we need to assert that there is no right for Christians to a risk-free environment – that to chase it is an ill-directed will o' the wisp. When we do open ourselves up to take risks, then we shall know the freedom of God which is beyond human understanding.

Thank you for listening. I am happy to be challenged and questioned.

+John Ripon and Leeds 2009