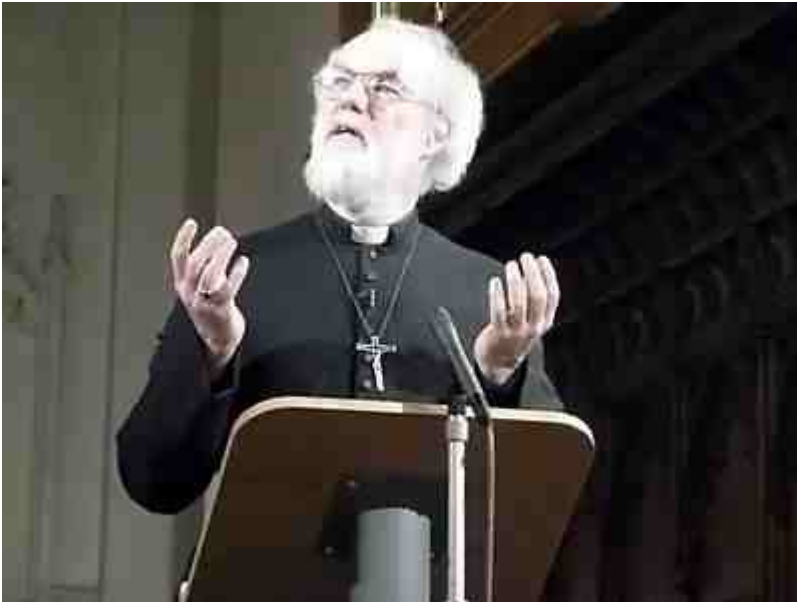


What Difference Does it Make?' - The Gospel in Contemporary Culture

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Church

I want to begin with a mention of one of the great classics of Cambridge literature. Some of you will I hope have read Gwen Raverat's book, *Period Piece: a Cambridge childhood* (those who haven't have a pleasure ahead of them). In it she gives a picture of her family, an Edwardian, academic family, the Darwins in fact. And among her uncles and aunts are several figures of ripe eccentricity. One uncle was absolutely convinced that whenever he left the room the furniture would rearrange itself while he was out. He was constantly trying to get back quickly enough to catch it in the act. Now, that is admittedly a rather extreme case of Cambridge eccentricity, but I suspect that it may ring one or two bells with some people around here. How many of us, I wonder, as children had that haunting suspicion that perhaps rooms rearranged themselves when we were out? Wondered whether what we were seeing was what still went on when our backs were turned? And I want to begin by thinking about that aspect of our human being in the world which is puzzled, frustrated, haunted by the idea that maybe what we see isn't the whole story, and maybe our individual perception is not the measure of all truth. Our ordinary perceptions of the world around are often jolted by grief or by joy. They're jolted in a way that leads us to want to say thank you, even if we don't know what to say thank you to or who to say thank you to. They're jolted when we don't know what to do with feelings for which we haven't yet got words or strategies. And that may be a long way from Gwen Raverat's uncle, but something of the same thing is going on. What if the world is not as tame as I'm inclined to think it is? What if my perception of things is not the measure of everything? In a sense the old chestnut is true. Religious feeling and perception in the world is based on, or related to, at least, a sense of human limit, human weakness if you will, but certainly related to the sense that to be human is not necessarily to be at the centre of things, or to be in control of things with a kind of lighthouse vision that, circling about the entire scope of reality, lights up everything with an even light centred in me, my mind or my heart.

But there are two things we can do with this—one of them healthy and one of them not so healthy, one of them leading to terrible religion and one of them leading to faith. Terrible religion happens when we use our religious language, our religious stories, as a way of pretending to ourselves that we are after all in charge, that actually we really *are* the centre of things and our limits can be overcome. We have access to absolute and infallible truth, to an even and just perspective on all things, we know what the world is really like and there's no more to be learned. It's terrible religion and it's also a terrible form of humanism and those who might have read Prof John Gray's books *Straw Dogs* will recall that he speaks there about the way in which Humanism itself, purportedly atheistic, still clings to certain religious ideas – or bad religious ideas – by pretending that human beings can actually answer all the questions they set themselves and overcome all the limits that might threaten their power. And the trouble with bad religion, what makes it terrible, is that it's a way of teaching you to ignore what is real.

Now, I'm going to suggest this evening that one of the tests of actual faith, as opposed to bad religion, is whether it stops you ignoring things. Faith, is most fully itself and most fully life-giving when it stops you ignoring things, when it opens your eyes and uncovers for you a world larger than you thought—and of course therefore a bit more alarming than you ever thought. One difference that faith makes is what more it lets you see, and how successfully it stops you denying, resisting, ignoring aspects of what's real.

I used to know a very remarkable man who was for twenty-six years the Senior Consultant Psychiatrist in Broadmoor—one of the more testing jobs that anybody could have—and he was a great Shakespearean enthusiast. One of his favourite lines from Shakespeare was from *The Tempest* where Prospero says to Miranda at one point 'What seest thou else?' and he said that that was the question that kept him going as a Psychiatrist. Confronted with horrendous and tragic situations with people deeply disturbed, locked up in their own fantasies, he would have to ask himself repeatedly 'What seest thou else?' what more is there to see? And for him, the enterprise of religious faith was about that *seeing more*, seeing that the world can't be fully seen just by one pair of eyes, that the world can't be fully seen even by the sum total of all pairs of human eyes, seeing that the world has a dimension of real strangeness, a depth not sounded. It's the area where religious faith most overlaps with art, but also with creative science. Creative science, remember, begins in that conviction that there is something *not seen*, there is something that I or we have been ignoring and it's time we stopped ignoring it. But the arts themselves are rooted in that feeling that the world is more than it shows to any one person in any one image at any one moment.

I want, in other words, to speak about religious faith as a process of educating our vision and educating our passions; educating our vision so that we understand how to see that we *don't* see, how to see behind surfaces, the depth that we're not going to master; educating our passions in the sense of helping us to grow up 'humanly' in such a way that we don't take fright at this strangeness and mysteriousness and run away for all we're worth. Faith, is inhabiting a larger world. I often find myself saying that one of the problems of perception in our world today is that it so often looks as though faith leads you into a smaller world and makes smaller human beings. Whereas those of us who try to live with and in it would want to say, actually it's an immeasurably larger world.

There's a famous sixteenth-century woodcut which you sometimes see reproduced in history books, which shows a human figure pushing its head through the firmament of heaven—the smooth, tidy firmament of heaven with the little stars on it—this person has pushed through it and is suddenly looking up into a sky that he's never seen before, packed with strange stars. And that woodcut is often taken as a kind of image of what it felt like in the sixteenth century as the Renaissance unfolded, and people realized that the world was immeasurably bigger than they'd ever thought. It's quite often used as an image of resistance to traditional Christianity and religious authority. Yet I want to say that it ought to be an image of *authentic faith*, of a real understanding of what the tradition of religious practice does for you, pushing you through the smooth painted surface, out

under a sky with stars you've never seen. All of that is by way of generalities about religious faith. And I want to move on from there to something a bit more specific.

The same theme recurs in all kinds of religious practice, from the most basic superstition to sophisticated Zen meditation. The same theme: the self is not the centre that we thought it was. There are things you're not seeing, and you'll never see them so long as you think of yourself as that solid lighthouse tower, planted in the middle of the world shedding equal light all around. But how does that play out specifically in the context of Christian faith? In that spectrum of religious practice, where and what is the Christian gospel the distinctive good news? And why might that be worth taking seriously?

And so I'm going to stop talking anything resembling philosophy for a bit and turn to the Gospel according to St John. Because I can't actually think of anywhere better to start in trying to spell out a little bit of what the Christian story of *seeing* looks and feels like. Those of you who know the gospel of John will recall the story of Jesus healing the man who's been blind from birth. And towards the end of that story Jesus has a sharp quarrel with some of the religious experts of the day, and he says to them: 'Because you say we can see, you're stuck in your guilt. Only if you know you can't see can you find your way.' It's one of those many startling paradoxes that that gospel is full of. Jesus is addressing the religious experts of the day and effectively saying 'Your problem is that you can't see that you can't see'. 'You can't see what it is that your habits, your status, and your skill prevent you engaging with.' And as the gospel story unfolds, we get a clearer picture of exactly what it is that these experts can't see. They can't see the mechanisms that drive them: mechanisms which lead them to be deeply afraid; mechanisms which allow them to use violence to protect their safe and self-justified positions; mechanisms that allow scapegoating, that allow security at the expense of others. They can't see all of that horrible, noisy, mechanical stuff going on inside them and they are stuck with their guilt, says Jesus. They don't know they can't see and when vision is offered to them, they run from it. Well, that's not entirely surprising, most of us when we're offered by candid friends or even more candid enemies pictures of what we might really be like, are inclined to run. Very few human beings, whatever we may like to tell ourselves, have a natural taste for hearing the truth about themselves. When somebody says to you 'Do you really want to know what I think?' the honest answer in most cases would be 'Actually, no'. So, so far, so obvious, you might say and you might feel you don't entirely blame the religious experts in the fourth gospel for panicking at the prospect of being shown the mechanisms of their own fear and their own violence.

But what makes the difference in St John's gospel is that the vision is not only the vision of yourself – a failing, ignorant, frightened self. The story of Jesus as St John tells it, is about a vision of something else which he calls *glory*; glory, the radiance and the beauty which is at the root of everything. In the light of that radiance, you can't keep up the pretence of self-justification and self-protection. In the full light of that radiance, you can't be like the religious experts and say 'I see, I've got it', and put the experience and the knowledge in a package in your pocket. And Jesus' mission in this gospel is described very clearly as the process of bringing that radical, radiant beauty to light in this world in such a way that only the most resolutely self-justifying and the most terminally terrified will want to resist

And self-justification, fear and violence and all the rest of the package, these things become impossible in the light of that radiance, because according to the gospel the radiance itself is the presence of an utter unselfishness at the heart of everything. What lies behind and beneath all reality, the gospel says, is an action whereby the most full, powerful, resourceful reality you can imagine, lets go of itself, makes over its own fullness of joy and life so that there may be life in another. It begins in eternity; it fleshes itself out time and again in the world's history. The radiant beauty – the glory – of that gospel is the glory of a divine *letting go*, and faced with that we're delivered, so we hope and pray, from the prison of violent self-justification. Why? Because if we are faced with that vision of an endless, unlimited unselfishness, we have no one we have to

persuade to love us, we have no hostile, defensive, cosmic tyrant somewhere over *there* that we have to placate. All we have is an endless gift of unconditional love. All we have is what again in the fourth gospel we see referred to as an unceasing *work*, an unceasing labour of giving life. At one point in the gospel Jesus is defending the fact that he's breaking the Sabbath by healing somebody, and he says, 'My father is still at work, and I am still at work.' There is no interruption possible for this unselfish act of life-giving, healing restoration and affirmation.

And again we can perhaps recognize what a wonderful truth that would be, if it were *true*. And we might wonder how, precisely, such a vision could come to feel natural or possible for us. But that's where the story winds the tension more and more tightly. As the story unfolds, we begin to see more clearly just how tightly we are locked in to our self-deceptions. Gradually, as the story goes on, we see more and more deeply how and why human beings want to resist that double vision, the vision of their own fear, and the vision of the love that overcomes it. And it seems as though fear wins. Jesus is condemned and executed. The refusal to *see* finally means his death on the cross. But, says the gospel, that death on the cross is itself a moment of glory yet again. Because there we see what a complete letting-go of the self in love, might look like. The symbol is lifted up before us, the symbol of a love with no conditions. The cross is itself, glory. The death of Jesus shows what is indestructible in the love of God, and the work goes on. God does not stop working, does not stop being this unselfish God because of our refusals. And so unbroken is that work, that it goes on through and beyond the death of Jesus on the cross, and is shown in the resurrection after the great Sabbath of death.

Now, almost infinitely more could be said about the gospel of John, one of the most inexhaustible texts in the whole of the bible, but I've chosen to speak about it at some length because it seems to me it is – of all the classical Christian texts – the one that most insists that faith is about *seeing*. It is about that double vision of myself as frightened and potentially violent and God as radiant, consistent and unceasingly creative. And that's what we're invited into in the story of the gospel; it's what we're invited into in Christian faith; recognizing the self-deception, recognizing the glory. Indeed in recognizing the glory, the radiance of an unceasing, selfless love we are somehow enabled to face more courageously and more fully our own self-deceit.

The first two things that Jesus says in St John's gospel are 'What do you want?' and 'Come and see'. There couldn't really be a better introduction to faith. 'What do you want? Do you actually want to change your life? Do you actually want human wholeness? And if you do, come and see.' So the gospel story begins not with an argument, but with an invitation, an invitation to examine yourself and an invitation to be in a place where you can see something different. ('What seest thou else?') We're invited to take time with this story, because its claim – although fairly simple – is quite a devastating one. The claim that the fourth gospel makes, indeed the whole of the Christian tradition makes, is that there is a single moment in the history of the human world where that world is completely transparent to the love that made it, where glory appears in a human face. And so, only in this light can you grasp divine love and human evasion and human violence in the one encounter.

What difference does it make? The difference that the gospel proposes, today and in every setting, is to say something like this: 'It is possible to live in a world where you can see your failure and your recurrent fears with clarity, but also to know that if you *want* healing, there are no conditions.' It is possible to live in a world where you can see these things. All that is, in some ways, still fairly general, but I want next to talk briefly about the states of mind, the attitudes that such a story and such an invitation suggest would be possible for human beings. I think that faith understood in this way, makes possible at least these three things. First of all, faith makes possible realism and perspective. It makes it possible for you to see yourself with, in the right sense, detachment; to see yourself not defensively and anxiously and not vainly and self-satisfiedly either, but to see yourself in all kinds of roles which are often inglorious, yet always redeemable. I see myself in faith, as somebody who fails. I see myself in faith as somebody who's loved. I see myself as somebody who

is called, summoned and entrusted with responsibility, and I see myself as failing again. And I see the possibility of restoration and new beginnings. And at no point in that cycle am I allowed to see myself as an ultimate waste of space. I can see myself realistically. I don't have to pretend I'm better than I am, I don't even have to pretend I'm worse than I am. I have to recognize my limits, my nature as a growing being and as a being that makes mistakes. And the message is 'don't panic'.

Secondly, this sort of faith makes possible a way of valuing what's around you. If the world really is grounded in some unimaginable act of final unselfishness, then all that's there is *gift*. As you have, so everyone has, a place before the source of all things. As you have, so everyone has a root in that eternal gift. You have been given space and time to grow into intimacy with holy love, and all around you is *gift*. The person next to you issues from divine giving, the material environment issues from divine giving, nothing is just *there*, everything and everyone is *given*.

And the third thing that grows out of this is that, if *that's* true, if indeed all things somehow flow from giving, then the natural way to live as human beings in the world is in giving and receiving in a mutual intimacy. Not only intimacy with holy love at the centre of everything, but an intimacy with one another in which we are committed to making one another more human in our relations with each other. And you could say too, an intimacy with the whole world around us which allows the world to make us more human and ourselves to make the world more itself – that relationship of respect toward our environment, which seems so inaccessible for 'advanced' societies. Perspective and realism, evaluation of things as gift, a sense that we are called to committed intimacy in making each other more human, those three things which this kind of faith makes possible, stand very firmly against their opposites which I think you'll find familiar:

- against emotional infantilism - that utter lack of perspective which puts my immediate needs and the gratification of my immediate passions at the centre of everything – which can show itself as greed and irresponsibility and can equally show itself, as Jesus so often says, in censoriousness and hatred of the other.
- against exploitative selfishness, against that desire to draw the whole human and non-human environment into the great hungry stomach of my ego, or of our collective human ego, that attitude which ravages our world around us.
- and against an attitude of calculation and suspicion in human relationships.

Now, if you don't see these things around in our culture, I suspect you may not be looking very hard. It seems to me that these possibilities opened up by faith as *seeing*, open the door to a way of resisting some of these most deeply destructive elements of the society we're in; the global culture which all of us in one way or another in varying degrees, inhabit. And if we're talking about what difference does it make in relation to faith in public life, without spelling all this out in the details of some sort of manifesto, I would say that faith conceived in this way requires of us that kind of freedom and perspective, which actually makes change in the direction of justice, change in the direction of reconciliation, truly possible.

So far then, I've been trying to say something about the overall character of a religious commitment in our world. That character which is best expressed in terms of not only seeing but seeing that we're not seeing everything. I've tried to anchor that a bit in one of the ways in which the basic Christian story is told, perhaps the most powerful of its expressions in the New Testament, the most fully developed and resourceful. And yet you could tell the same story beginning from any of the four gospels. I tried to suggest how seeing the world as the gospel of St John invites us to see it, begins to grow in us a set of human responses to the world around which will be the material of resistance to what's most destructive in our world. But, you might well say, that's all very attractive but is there any particular reason for thinking that it's true? And that's a question which everyone

has to answer for himself or herself, precisely *because* it's not a knockdown argument we're talking about, but an invitation we're not going to get to the point where someone standing in the pulpit of this church is going to say 'Here is the proof and any fool can see that that's how we should approach reality'. That's why I mentioned earlier the significance of both science and art in understanding faith. There's an element of risk involved in all our significant commitments. The scientist embarking on a new direction of experimentation is taking risks that will lead to a whole series of non-confirmations of a theory and perhaps finally to something that at last clicks. But this in turn will set off a new train of questions. And then when we're faced with a great work of the imagination, with the poem, film, play or novel, it's not as though the author comes to us and says 'I can prove to you that this is how reality is'. That author is saying something a lot more like Jesus at the beginning of the fourth gospel, 'Come, see. Discover what you can see by standing here'. And if by standing here it's possible to see what otherwise I can't see, I may perhaps at least begin to suspect that there is truth to be seen from this perspective where some of my old habits of ignoring things have been shattered

To come out of a production of *King Lear* shaken, uncertain and disturbed, is to know that I've seen something I'd rather not have seen. There's more than I thought. Is *King Lear* true? Well, it's not a true story about ancient Britain, but it's a true story about the world we're in. Uncomfortable because true, because it puts me in touch with things I might be a lot happier not knowing. So when that question arises 'Is all that true?' my answer is that, if by standing where Jesus invites you to stand in the gospel you see more than you would otherwise see, you see a world larger than you thought you inhabited, you have at least to ask yourself 'Is not *this* a reality?' and perhaps also to ask 'Am I afraid of this reality?' And if this even *might* be the truth, might be the grain of the real world, where do I want to put myself? *What do you want? Come and see.*

The story of Jesus as it's presented to us in the gospel of John and the rest of the Christian Bible, the story of Jesus is unlike any other (I say this as a Christian believer) in that it holds together, inseparably, that twofold vision I've spoken of: the overwhelming reality of divine gift, the terrifying reality of human self-deceit and fear. The story of Jesus as it's told there is not just an epiphany – a revelation of glory and no more – and it's not just a commandment or a set of instructions dropped down from heaven. It is a manifestation of radiant beauty that lands in our world in the form of a profound moral challenge, because it's a showing of active love that dissolves fear.

There are all kinds of experiences, epiphanies, manifestations of the holy. Some of you may remember that wonderful poem of Rilke's about the archaic statue. It ends with memorable lines 'There is no place where you are unseen. You have to change your life'. Now, that sense of a revelation which invites you to change, that's *part* of what the gospel is about, but it's even more, because the revelation is itself a revelation of an action of love into which you are invited to come, with which you are invited to cooperate. *Come and see.* Find if it is possible to let go of that anxious and violent self in the face of a promise of radiant beauty; to be made alive in this way. Across the human world many ways are proposed for human healing, for the restoration of humanity, but the claim of the gospel is quite simply that here in this encounter with this figure, we are brought to what the gospel itself describes as *a secure and eternal place*, 'in the bosom of the Father', next to the heart of all things, the place where fear becomes meaningless. And so, in thinking about what the invitation to Christian faith means, I'd say that at the very least you have to ask 'What is it that my position, my culture, my education, my status, my habits, what is it that all of those stop me seeing?' 'What does my society educate me to ignore? What does my education educate me to ignore?' And then to reflect on what might be seen in this territory around the figure of Jesus. And if it is a world larger and deeper than I imagined, without shutting out any dimension of the world, the emotions and the perceptions that belong to humanity, if it allows that comprehensive understanding of who we are and acceptance of the range, the fallibility and the promise of our humanity, then the challenge of faith is the challenge about whether we are willing to live in that

larger world. A world whose truth is perhaps only fully vindicated as we discover that without it, no fully healing change happens in the world of our experience.

What do you want? Come and see. And then of course those other words so profoundly resonant in the gospel, which Jesus speaks to his friends – 'Launch out into the deep': understand that your life lies in the not knowing as well as the knowing; that your life lies in understanding your limits; that your life lies in a letting-go which allows love, reconciliation and promise and which, if you believe it aligns you with precisely that energy of creative gift which sustains the entire universe.

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