



How individuals with profound intellectual impairments can be models for the church in Scotland

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God's call to the world is constant¹ yet we live in a time when many are not listening and where the church in Scotland is uncertain as to whether it is getting the balance of its mission right, or not. That mission, to reflect God's glory back to him in praise, to minister to the world in accordance with the gospel imperative and to witness in itself to God's healing grace, has been beset by fears. There are fears of falling numbers in pews and of dwindling revenues, fears about maintaining buildings and the viability of ministry in certain locations, fears of a secular society that mocks or scorns Christianity.

We have become a fearful people. We do not fully understand what is happening and our response is to worry. We are like the disciples in the weeks running up to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We may even be like the disciples who became so paralysed with fear and uncertainty that they slept when they were asked to watch with him in the garden. Jesus, however, has told us not to be afraid: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'² He asks us to trust him. And an element of trust is to take stock of a situation and to see the positive as well as the negative in it, the opportunities as well as the threats.

The greatest strength for the church in Scotland today starts with our faith in God as revealed in his Son: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'³ This faith is supported by the theology of Creation: that God made the world; that he made all things well; that everything depends on him; and that he goes on caring for it.

Julian of Norwich grasped this truth through a vision in which a hazelnut came to represent the entire created universe, ‘God made it, God loves it, God keeps it’,⁴ she observed. That something so ordinary – a staple food of mediaeval people – could be a part of God’s world, God’s care, was to her a revelation of God’s goodness and largesse, one that has resonated down the ages. She echoed the words of Jesus himself: ‘Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith!’⁵

The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes the relationship between God and his creation explicit:

With creation, God does not abandon his creatures to themselves. He not only gives them being and existence, but also, and at every moment, upholds and sustains them in being, enables them to act and brings them to their final end. Recognizing this utter dependence with respect to the Creator is a source of wisdom and freedom, of joy and confidence:

For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it. How would anything have endured, if you had not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved? You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living. [Wisdom 11:24–26]⁶

If we allow ourselves as the church in Scotland to start from this point, acknowledging our dependence on God, stripped of certainty and power, we are likely to be in a better position to see God’s action in the life of the church and in society around us. In this way, we will be better able to respond to God’s call.

Several consequences will flow from this. Firstly we will be able to see clearly how things are and not how we would like them to be. Secondly, we will be able to see the actions of God as central, rather than concentrating on our own administrative, liturgical or social

practices. Thirdly, from discerning God's work in the world in those currently outside the church, we may be able to develop ways of listening and speaking in faith to people who share our concerns and values, in order to open channels into secular society.

Looking at each of these in turn, we see that they are all grounded in an incarnational theology. God does not exist in some ideal or imaginary world. In revelation, God became present in human flesh at a particular time and place. God came into human society into the way things actually are, into a world ruled by secular powers which did not consider people as individuals, but as statistics to be measured in a census. In a world where accommodation was limited, even his birthplace was improvised. God laid aside power and status and was born an infant in a family that worked for its living. God lived amongst people who were just as status-conscious and out for themselves as our own society. Yet he also encountered hospitality and recognition and friendship. This is the world in which he lived, the world he died for and to which he gifted his Spirit to shape his church. We start with the reality of the world, then, and should not allow ourselves to be tempted to create an idol or a utopia of it.

Secondly, the centrality of God in the world should be our focus, not our own practices. Jesus revealed the Father and the life he shows us is one emptied of power and status. The genealogies at the start of Matthew and Luke's gospels⁷ establish no claims to worldly power; instead, they demonstrate Jesus' rootedness. The people he mixed with were ordinary people, not the governors or the leading merchants of his day, but working people, the vulnerable, the outcast, the disabled, the sick and the children. In his ministry it was what he did that mattered – healing, teaching, restoring – not the status of what he did; it was the effect he created in others, not the particularities of how he did so that was the focus. He always pointed to his Father, directing the response of thanksgiving and glory for what he had done back to the Father. His ministry was his witness. Jesus was not content to create a circle around him that would settle down and become a group of insiders with its own rituals and history, closed to others, the sort of place where status and power would be consolidated. He habitually wanted to reach out into new relationships in order to proclaim the message concerning his Father: 'I have other sheep that do not belong

to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.⁸ When Jesus ascended into heaven and sent his Spirit⁹ he did not send the Spirit to one person, but to all the apostles, where differences of practice and temperament, of race and abilities existed. In doing this, he sanctified diversity.

By contrast with Jesus' life, we as the churches in Scotland have quarrelled both within and between denominations over how we do things. We have allowed theology and church practice to divide us. In our divisions we risk being seen as God's divided and quarrelsome people. To the world, the very same symbols and rituals that represent God's presence amongst us have become the marks of sectarianism. The world, as a consequence has not been able to understand these marks or to see God through them. They are known only as something that sets the church apart from ordinary human experience. If the church has become foreign to many people, however, the need to make sense of life, of eternal things, of values, of relationships, has not gone away.

To take a particular example, the NHS recognises that individuals have spiritual as well as health needs and that spiritual care is an important component of well-being.¹⁰ One hospital website¹¹ says 'Spiritual Care is about having someone listen to your story and help you deal with your experience'. There is now a thriving ministry in spiritual care chaplaincy. This often employs what Gerkin¹² calls a 'narrative-hermeneutic' framework to making sense of life experiences through the paradigms of Christianity but without clothing them in religious terminology. Several similar chaplaincies in prisons, the armed forces, schools and the workplace witness to this.

The search for salvation, in the sense of reconciliation with God's will and purpose,¹³ has not diminished, despite the estrangement between the people of Scotland and the church. We can clearly see the manifestation of this in the response to God's call through the thousands of different ways in which people seek to create social justice in the present. They do this through volunteering and fund-raising, through care of the vulnerable, through the celebration of nature, as well as in wider commitments to the framework of public services that underpin the notion of the value of the individual person. People may have left the churches but God is still calling and perhaps

these secular ministries are a sign of their response.

It is at this precise point that the church has to drop its own pretensions to power and status and learn to engage in partnership with individuals and organisations engaged in secular ministry. This third sense of the church emptying itself of power and status is probably the hardest to put into practice. The first two, living in the real world and following the pattern of Jesus' life can still be done within the comfort of the organisational church itself. Engaging with secular society, however, requires the church – and that means every member – to go out into the world and to be both a witness in life and a communication channel for faith. That is too much for many Christians. Many prefer to live their faith by letting others speak for them. They prefer a pietist approach, making it difficult for the world to make sense of Christian faith.

However, alongside this theoretical framework of where the church is today and how it has to meet the gospel challenge, we can set a real, alternative model for the church. This alternative model may perhaps better embody all three imperatives of taking the world as it is, seeing God's action as central, and building bridges into the secular world.

As an example, here are two people who are leading the way through their own ministry to the church in Scotland. David is a twenty-four-year-old man with an eye for design, who has won a national photographic competition. He is a good swimmer, he loves football and dancing. David is very sociable and he joins in community activities in his village. David is very cuddly: to be with David is to feel a sense of restfulness and peace. He regularly attends a farm where he likes to feed the pigs. Just recently, David took delivery of a small machine which his family and friends can help programme to overcome his lack of a voice.

Louis is twenty-five. He is tall and handsome, active and sociable. He loves swimming, walking and horse-riding. To be with Louis is to feel energised by his constant interaction and the connection he makes as he smiles and acknowledges your presence. He talks, using single words or phrases, in a grammar stripped of agency or time or place. 'Swimming!' he says, not 'I have been swimming' or 'I want to go swimming' or 'have you been swimming?' He pronounces it 'wih-ih'.

In the eyes of the world, both men share a lack of status. They

also share in common the easy characterization that they ‘fall short’ of some sort of standard, that their lack of intellect is a barrier to participation. Their dependence on others for care, for communication with the world, for a place in the world, is understood as part of their condition. Nevertheless, to the church, these men may be models of Christ-like humility. This is not to romanticize them or to deny that they experience and display the same range of human flaws and sins as the rest of us. It is only to point out that with sufficient resources to enable them, these men can live fulfilled lives that are neither more nor less stressful than anybody else’s. It is when you know Louis or David personally, when you encounter the person, rather than the facade that the world shies away from, that God’s goodness is revealed, as in all encounters with another where God is present. Considering our theology of Creation and the inherent goodness of nature we can ask: What is God trying to teach the church and the world through the lives of those such as David and Louis?

One man who understood about the special insights people like David and Louis offer was Henri Nouwen, an academic theologian who gave up university life for a place as a carer in a L’Arche community. In his work as a carer Nouwen met a man called Adam. Adam was twenty-two years old. He had a mum and a dad and a brother. He couldn’t talk and he needed to be looked after. He used a wheelchair and needed medication. The community was a very new life for Nouwen. He wasn’t used to helping somebody to get dressed and have a bath; he wasn’t used to helping somebody clean his teeth and to go to the loo. Nouwen was used to going to work, writing on the computer and speaking at conferences. To begin with, Nouwen didn’t know what to do to help Adam. He felt anxious about all he had to do and wasn’t sure if he was doing it properly. But little by little, he came to know Adam and realized that Adam was *his friend*. He realized that although Adam didn’t say anything, he felt deeply, and that he cared for Henri Nouwen himself, and could guide him in what to do. More than anything else, Nouwen realized that Adam could show him who God was.

Nouwen realized that Adam’s gift was to live his life in relationship with his family and his friends and his carers and to show them that God was in everyday living, God in each one of us. This is what

Nouwen wrote:

Adam kept reminding us that the beauty of care giving was not just in giving but also in receiving from him. He was the one who opened me to the realisation that the greatest gift I could offer to him was my open hand and open heart to receive from him his precious gift of peace. [...] Caring for Adam was allowing Adam to care for us as we cared for him. [...] Only then was our care for Adam not burdensome, but privileged because Adam's care for us bore fruit in our lives.¹⁴

To return to David and Louis. Both of them depend on relationships. To talk of David or Louis is to be mindful of their families, their carers, their cultures. In depending on others for their care, they remind us that we all are dependent on God and his initiative of love and grace towards us. The Bible declares that our God is a God of relationships: the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is inherently relational. As human beings we are not individualized entities, as the Enlightenment would have us believe. All of us, created in God's image, are beings intrinsically dependent on each other and on God.

In another respect David and Louis are models. They have paid a price in their lives from the social isolation they have experienced at times.¹⁵ Deep down, as a rule, we do not expect life to challenge us so profoundly. When it does, we are disorientated until we can make sense of it. Similarly, David and Louis and all those close to them have wrestled with God to accept his will. In this, however, they model the same struggle to accept the Father's will as Jesus himself showed in Gethsemane, 'that this cup might pass from me'.¹⁶

David and Louis and their families, then, demonstrate lives in which love and acceptance are central, and where status and power and the promotion of self is of no importance. Seen through the eyes of David or Louis, the status associated with the cost or branding of an object, is meaningless. It is the thing itself that matters. On the other hand, where power is important for David and Louis is in the provision of the care that their conditions require. Their families often take up the role of speaking truth and giving guidance to the powers that such offer provision, on their behalf.

Finally, David and Louis can teach us to be joyful. Their presence brings pleasure to others and their personal qualities point to God's goodness. This is clearly demonstrated in the monthly communion service we share¹⁷ where, in an accessible liturgy pared down to make sense for them, David and Louis participate and transform the worship by their presence. Just as Jesus transforms life by turning everyday actions into rituals that point to God and make God manifest, so it is when we meet David and Louis and Rannoch and their families and friends. In the action of coming together in a circle of friendship and love, of reverence for God and a wish to express our thanks to him in praise, we are transformed. If sacraments are holy things, pointing beyond themselves to God, David and Rannoch and Louis in the presence of the Eucharist also become sacraments.

Through the diverse effects of intellect, history or power, the Eucharist has often become a point or place of division, but David and Louis are people of experience not of intellectual speculation. In participating in and experiencing the Eucharist they recall for the church the sense in which Jesus initiated the Eucharist as a self-offering of his whole life to the service and love of God. He too was a man of experience. He experienced God in his life as a personal relationship; he modelled God's love and a self-giving servanthood that sought to affirm others. His request to us is that we follow his example.

Here in the church in Scotland, we have young people who are leading us towards a contemporary understanding of how to model the life of Jesus. Though dependent, in their own lives, on the secular ministries of the world for the provision of services which meet their needs, they also demonstrate an understanding of Christian mission that follows Jesus' own, where those emptied of power and status are, in fact, *at the centre*. They do not demand that they take over the church or that everybody should be like them. On the contrary, they bear witness to the uniqueness and diversity of each person. So – let us look to David and Louis as models of a forward-looking, confident church in Scotland, where status and power are not important, but where the grace of God is made manifest through their participation.

Notes

- ¹ John 3:16, ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’
- ² John 14:27.
- ³ John 14:6–7.
- ⁴ Dame Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 7, 47 [‘In this little thing I saw three attributes: the first is that God made it, the second is that he loves it, the third is that God cares for it.’].
- ⁵ Luke 12:27.
- ⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 301.
- ⁷ Matt 1:1–17 and Luke 3:23–38.
- ⁸ John 10:16.
- ⁹ Acts 2:1–4.
- ¹⁰ NHS Education for Scotland, *Spiritual Care Matters: An Introductory Resource for All NHS Scotland Staff* (Edinburgh: NHS Education for Scotland, 2009), 6–7.
- ¹¹ www.nhsforthvalley.com/forthvalleyroyal/about-the-hospital/spiritual-care-centre
- ¹² Charles V. Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).
- ¹³ Doctrine Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church, *On Salvation* (Grosvenor Essay no. 5; Edinburgh: SEC, 2008).
- ¹⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Adam: God's Beloved* (London: DLT, 1997).
- ¹⁵ Iain Prayne, retired Head teacher at Canaan Lodge, the multiple-disability unit of the Royal Blind School, Edinburgh, reports that in his experience over decades of teaching, all of his pupils went through an existential struggle in their teenage years to accept themselves and their conditions.
- ¹⁶ Matt 26:39.
- ¹⁷ Described in the Autumn 2011 issue of the Scottish Episcopal Church’s *inspires* magazine: Kate Sainsbury, “Special needs’ communion service”.