

Working without a Net

Sermon by Rev. Art Lester - Sunday 27 September, 2020

Do you ever hear songs or phrases that seem to stick with you without any apparent reason? Something you may not quite understand but which somehow lodges in your head? One such for me was a song by Waylon Jennings, a country western singer. To be honest-- I'm not even a fan..

*"We don't even know where we are.
They say that we're circling a star.
Well, I'll take their word—I don't know.
I'm dizzy, so maybe it's so."*

In those simple lines, our biggest human mystery stands revealed. As a child, I used to love looking up into the stars and getting a sense of the immensity of the universe. But sometime along the way—I'm not sure exactly when—that very immensity began to seem oppressive. And as I learned more of what the super scientists like Brian Cox have to say, that big, interesting universe out there started to seem alien and threatening. It's one thing to sit securely on a fixed bit of immovable earth and wonder about the stars, as the ancients must have done. But it's another thing altogether when you become aware that we too are swirling in vast, empty space, with no up and no down.

In the village in southern Spain where I have a little cottage, the cemetery sits on top of the highest hill. And next to it is a gigantic rock, the size of a freight car, which has been entirely painted white, as it has been for centuries. This is to serve as a marker for Jesus, when he flies over to raise the dead from their graves. They are taking no chances that their small village will be overlooked, as it has been by governments of the past. It's not hard to identify with them. In a universe so vast, the small child in each of us might say, "How can I be found?" Even if there is someone or something that will come and collect me, how on earth—or maybe how in space—will they find me?

The sensation of being in space, of weightlessness, is sometimes reported to be one in which you feel that you're falling, which is the only natural way for humans to feel when there's no pull of gravity. And if there's no real up and no real down, that's not a bad description of what is actually happening.

It can get a bit scary. It seems to me that the only way out of the problem is simply this: to turn falling into leaping.

The existentialist theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, used to talk about something he called the “leap of faith.” This was a leap that had to be made by everyone at some point in his or her spiritual lives. After you have read all the books, heard all the sermons and sung all the hymns, there remains this one solitary act. If you have been looking for the proof of God and Heaven, you have struck out. If you have asked the minister, the rabbi or the priest a hundred times for assurance, you have received nothing but opinion. At this point you have a few options. You could go on attending church or synagogue, trying to auto-hypnotise yourself into a sense of security. You could, as so many do, shrug and forget about the whole religion thing until forced to consider it in some future crisis. Or you could listen to Kierkegaard and take the leap of faith.

To make the leap of faith, it is first necessary to find the cliff edge. This isn't something you can do in your spare time. It involves a lot of thrashing about in the undergrowth of life, taking blind alleys and avoiding mirages in deserts. To reach the abyss takes a lot of living. It means being restless within your life, experiencing a feeling of incompleteness with the ordinary rewards of existence, a sense that there is something more than this. Often it will take the form of a life crisis- a bereavement, for example. The thing is, all roads lead to the edge if you follow them long enough. There comes a time when it just isn't enough to have gilt-edged stocks and deluxe insurance policies.

The cliff edge may just pop up out of nowhere. It may be composed of the ordinary events of life. It may come at breakfast time, as in the case of W. H. Auden's poem where he says, “The crack in the teacup leads on to the land of the dead.” It may come gradually, with ageing. It may come as a result of the innocent questions asked by our children. It may be ignored for a time, maybe a long time, but when it appears you realise it has never been far away.

Standing on the cliff means coming to the end of theory and speculation. However lucid your theories of life have been, however firm your grasp of biology and physics, you are faced with the unknown and unknowable. The abyss of uncertainty is there, an undeniable fact. Belief is not very helpful, because you have the uneasy feeling that belief was just a creation of the limited mind. What makes pretty conversation in seminars isn't much use at the cliff edge. What you need is that most elusive thing of all: *faith*.

Faith isn't dependent upon theories and doctrine. That is just the wrapping we give it when we organise religions. Faith, we have good reason to believe, is a kind of perception, a sensing organ like your nose and ears. Where belief proposes, calculates, speculates, faith *perceives*. A good explanation of this is found in the Book of Hebrews. The writer, until the last century erroneously supposed to be Paul, says: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." In other words, faith is not a concept but a perception. With it you have substance and evidence, not wishes and ideas.

Kierkegaard seems to be saying that faith comes only after a leap. You can't have it sitting on the firm ground; it is only available when you launch yourself into space. It isn't a weekend activity at all. There is a kind of lock on the door to faith that goes like this: you can't have it unless you take the risk that you'll find nothing at all. A lovely cosmic joke with an unknown punch line. It's only available when nothing else will do.

The Nigerian writer Ben Okri wrote a book a few years ago called *Astonishing the Gods*. In one chapter he has a character stumbling onto the abyss, an un-crossable chasm. There is only one way across—an invisible bridge. This bridge is composed of mist, of light, of feelings. It can sometimes be glimpsed, but it seems too insubstantial to stand on. Yet, we are told, that is exactly what you must do. This is only possible when there is no other route to take. You have to be desperate to cross the abyss, which means you have to be good and fed up with all the diversions and detours of your personal history. You have to become exhausted with false trails and red herrings. The longing to cross over has to become very great, even greater than your fear. When you glimpse the bridge, you have the opportunity to cross. This might happen many times or only once.

Okri treats us to a vision of what happens to you if you don't cross the bridge, if you bottle out at the crucial moment. He says you will become half-dead, half alive. What Okri is talking about is the soul; the errands of the spiritual path must be met and accomplished or one has no life at all.

Okri and Kierkegaard both seem to be saying that it is somehow possible to *make* faith. You have to keep the bridge intact by walking on it. At each step it may seem too insubstantial to bear your weight. With each footstep it may be that your little scheming brain wants to say, "What?" and give up the whole thing. But each stride builds more bridge to step upon; it is the act of walking that creates the struts and girders out of mist.

This is more than challenging. This is the most crucial undertaking of all. We are being asked to take our small store of inspiration and trust and put everything on it. We are asked to do that if we are Christian, Jew, Pagan or nothing at all. We have to sift through the words of Jesus, Rumi and Marcus Aurelius and the observations from our own lives and cobble together a bridge building kit. And we have to do it with no guarantees. None whatever, except for the inner whisper that grows louder as we get closer to the void. As the old circus expression goes, you are working without a net.

I believe that, as Hafiz said, “When the rider is ready, the horse appears.” What we will need to cross the chasm is already there within us. It needs to become ready for use, and that is what the ups and downs of life are for. When we finally launch ourselves onto the bridge, we may find that it is not as insubstantial as we fear. The weakness, says Okri, is in us, not in the bridge. Our job is to overcome the fear by walking.

When you launch yourself into space, or try to tread on the surface of an invisible bridge, what you are really doing is calling the bluff of the vast and seemingly alien universe. You are calling time on all the ruses that keep you comfortable and—so it seems—spiritually empty. What you find is not just rescue from some huge hand or a cunning engineering feat of beams and cables, but something infinitely more valuable. You are taking your place as a rightful inhabitant of creation, a child of God, if you like, and someone whose safety, whose belonging, has always been guaranteed. And in mid-air, you find that you are not falling at all, but soaring.

When life grows flat and empty, have a good look around. When the world betrays you, see if you can’t spot a few beams and cables, made of air and feelings. When you despair, you may be only a heartbeat away from the bridge. And tell yourself, loud and clear, that it’s time to move forward. That’s the only game in town. That’s why we’re here, after all.

So, go ahead. Put one foot in front of the other. Stare down the big, bad universe and move onward, the way you were always meant to.

AMEN