

The Question of God Lecture: The Radical Upagainstness

Grace and Peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you were in the early church, you would have responded Amen! That is: dead right! Right on! You said it! Yeah!

This is because the people in the early church knew what Paul meant by that ritual: a way to communicate that we are dealing with the serious business of our lives in depth.

Today these symbols have become abstract and difficult to use, and that has something to do with the fact that you and I are living in the middle of a radical transition, a turning Point in human history and in the history of the church.

Writers and journalists have stretched the limits of language in their attempt to get a fix on the radicality of our times.

Post Christendom, Post civilization, Post-modern age

Teilhard Chardin called what's happening to us all "a mutation in humanness" – he likened it to a time on our planet when the rocks came alive.

In the last 40,50,60,70 years of this stupendous time, there has been a remarkable recovery in the understanding of faith and church and the coming to be of brand-new powerful forms and clarity on what it means to be the church as social pioneers. And this is what our five sessions will be about.

Poetry can help us get hold of the radicality of life in the deeps. I am going to borrow someone's words that open up the cracks. This guy has been one of my friends for a long time. Maybe you know him too.

D.H. Lawrence:" Not I, but the wind...." (Song of the man who came through)

And here's another piece of poetry: Phillips New Testament: "As far as we are concerned... ()

We are going to do a bit of scientific analysis of the spirit malaise of Century 20 humans. There is nothing you will hear this afternoon that you don't already know. Then you might ask, why talk about it?

Perhaps this is because the things that we know deepest we need to talk about the most.

To do our analysis we'll use a little screen and talk about life in Century 20 under the Old Mood and The New Mood. We will have a description of The Objective situation, the Interior crisis, The Existential question and The Response: escape - embrace Life

Century 20 witnessed the end of western civilization and in so doing was driven to experience the nothingness of Being.

1900s tremendous optimism and expectations... NO: World War I

Roaring 20s: life on the upbeat, giddiness... NO: the Great Depression

1930s: life picked up again: New Deal etc... NO: World War II and the end-Bombing Hiroshima

The end of Europe rationality, the end of tidy systems, the end of the dream of wrapping it all up. Life would never, ever, be the same again.

When folk came home from the 2nd world war it was study, study, study to answer the question of WHY? They must get to the bottom of this: more study. What did they find? They found that there was NO BOTTOM: nothing, no-thing! NO-THING-NESS. Life was not a tidy system: it was Absurd: sheer madness. And at the end of it all was DEATH. And, oh, The POWER of DEATH.

During the six years I was an altar boy in the Roman Catholic church in Port Macquarie, NSW, Australia, my job description required that I be present to serve the priest presiding over funerals. The bells, the slow crawl of the car at 2 m.p.h. Then the gravesite. What always got me was the clonk! – the dull thud of the earth.....

Have you noticed the power of death...? Plane crash at Potomac Bridge: traffic stopped at both ends. Death stopped the traffic. And every traffic spotter in his helicopter knows it is a recognized fact how vehicle traffic always slows down when it passes an accident scene.

What was the experience of all this? More than a bad mood!

A trapdoor opened after Hiroshima and Nagasaki and we were plunged into a devastating internal crisis. Nothing seemed secure, nothing seemed certain. It was a sense that everything is passing away.

The Fifties was the time of THE Great Fear, a pervading Unease.

The US President... man in blue suit with the attaché case
and inside the red button.

Time of the nuclear bomb shelters, terrified the whole planet would be nuked
To kingdom come. At any moment it could all go down the tubes.

Suddenly civilization realized its utter creatureliness.
How to deal with this insecurity?

But when you thought about it, you found yourself asking: When was life any
other way? Life seemed to be a system built to constantly crack open your
sense of security.

Life in womb: nice. Forced out into the daylight: CRACK
Parent.... great folk.... Mother told first lie..... CRACK
Sisters.....terrific.... piano, violin, smart.... Alcoholics: CRACK
Football team...wow...Skeeter you can be mascot.... CRACK

No security, nothing is sure, nothing certain.

When I turned 13, it became very clear that I was a rather small boy: Shorty”
My mother took me to Sydney to see the doctor: pills, iron, oysters?
Mrs. Stanfield, Brian is not going to grow anymore! CRACK!

Rocks we think we can stand on forever just crumble into dust. No certainty, no
Security. A sense of suffocation, of gasping for breath, and a scream..”But I want
to live!

And when I was sixteen, it was off to boarding school. Kicked out of the cozy nest
Of home. I can remember the first night at boarding school: a supper of bread
and gravy, and then out into the playing field for recreation: I was alone without a

friend in the world. And it was as if I had landed on another planet. And I was forlorn. How can life be this way: It seemed as if life was a futile game. Life is unfair.

And a quiet interior scream: it can't be this way!!!! I want to live! It is this way!
This is life!

Have you ever seen that science experiment when all the air is sucked out of a can? Pitiful wreck of a fine can. Pitiful wreck of my fine images of what life ought to be like.

When your whole world collapses on you, your whole life is up for grabs.

The question comes: WHO AM I?

This is not an intellectual question.

It is an existential question: that is, a question that keeps you awake at night, gnaws at your entrails, gives you headaches.

It is a life and death question.

I had a friend who used to drive round and round and show up at my apartment in the middle of the night.

Settle down!

"I just can't settle down."

"Why don't you go back home and get some sleep."

"I can't sleep. I won't calm down. I won't settle down. I want the answer!

Women and children are getting napalmed in Vietnam, there are fifty million hungry people, my sister has cancer of the throat, my father died a month ago, I'm 20,000 dollars in debt, I feel like shit and you ask me to calm down!

How, in the name of God, can a I live in a world like this"

That is how the WHO AM I? question comes. It is not an abstract question.

THE FLIGHT FROM LIFE

The thing about this life question is that as soon as the question hits, or actually before it hits, you and I are already running from it, because it is such a dread-filled question that challenges your whole life. You try to cover up just how

unsettled you are. Watergate of the soul. And when you and I run, we fly from the question in two kinds of escapes.

We either hang on to the PAST or we hide from the QUESTION.

When we hang on to the past, we find some security, some Linus Blanket and hang on it like grim death. We find a new religion, a new lover, a new therapy group, go back to the cottage and get away from it all. But the question nags and nags.

Or we HIDE.

Like the ostrich: if I don't look at it, it will go away but the blowtorch of the Century 20-21 keeps flaming away inside.

Or we hang up a Do Not Disturb Sign and Life kicks down the door.

Or we decide just to be happy, what the heck! If you keep on smiling, it won't get at you.

I was teaching a course once, and dropped this line about "deciding just to be happy". A middle-aged woman dressed in a colour scheme of yellow with pink hearts suddenly interrupted the lecture, stood up, and screamed: "I'M Happy; Don't you say things like that. I'm Happy! I'm Happy!and burst into tears. One of the teachers took her out for a glass of water. But she never returned.

Or you get really busy with a bunch of projects. If you can keep busy enough, maybe the question will go away. So, you join two or three committees, take up a new hobby. Or you become an intellectual and engage in learned discussions. That way you can persuade yourself you are on top of the situation. But not your own life.

Or you get high on cocaine, methane, music, wilderness air. Or we take up a fad: go on another diet, collect toy cars, play computer games or shop shop shop trying to fill up the hole at the center of our beings. We'll do anything to keep us away from grappling with this question.

Well, who am I?

The answer to the question that finally comes in one way or another:
I am a dying entity – a dying human being- who is, nevertheless, free.

Death is real, just as real as life...
But everyone is running from it.

The paradox is that the very key to life is the acceptance of death. And it is always
a particular death, we don't know when, we don't know where.

My friend from my hometown survived 38 bombing raids over Germany as a tail
gunner. He broke his neck on a banana peel a month after he came home.

Until you and I come to terms with the fact that we are going to die, we can never
take life seriously. True but also until you and I come to terms with what we are
going to do with our death, we will never take life seriously.

Until you and I decide to be a dead woman or a dead man every day of our life,
we will never know what real living is.

The challenge of the old mood is to embrace our death- the death of Western
civilization and our own death: our creatureliness, our contingency.

NEW MOOD

The Old Mood was about the Assault of non-being. Now for the New mood: The
Assault of Being.

In 1957 the world was electrified with the sound of a Beep, Beep, and the sight of
a flashing pinpoint in the night sky. A new age was dawning with Sputnik – the
symbol of radical revolution, and with it, a new mood. The old mood was Nada,
Nada, Nada, nothing, nothing, Death. The new mood was possibility. Complete
open-endedness and endless possibility.

I first sniffed this in the early 60s. There was a concert in nearby hall that I
dutifully went to. A different mood in the air. New songs: Peter, Paul and Mary.

The Time they are a Changing. The mood of those songs was palpable and intoxicating.

Suddenly everyone started yelling for their rights: Black power, Grey Power, Flower power, Aboriginal land right. The Third world was yelling and fighting for independence. Women were yelling for rights. Blacks were yelling for equality under the law. Martin Luther King was raising a movement in the South of the USA.

The Grape pickers were yelling as were the auto workers yelling for better benefits. And students were yelling about everything under the sun.

It was as if our mouths were prised open in permanent astonishment: Information tripling every five years, heart transplants, new nations, man on the moon, genetic engineering, personal computers, computer networking. We saw women premiers and heads of state in UK, Norway, Ireland and in an Islamic country like Pakistan.

If it doesn't exist, just invent it. And now we have virtual reality, folks booking trips to the moon. 1989 was a case study in possibility: down came the communist government in East Germany; everyone was clutching for a fragment of the Berlin Wall. Then the whole of Eastern Europe was screaming for democracy.

A socialist congressman was elected in Vermont and the NDP won a crushing victory in Ontario. And it looked as if there would be something called a Peace Dividend in the US.

Open-endedness, Endless possibility. And everything up for grabs.

What is moral: What is a family? A nation? You decide!

Just make up your mind and have a go.

Only the nuclear family: you got to be kidding.

People are making all kinds of families: single parent and child,

Lesbian, gay and straight. Who knows how many others?

We're told the planet is now alive: it's Gaia!

We're told that humans and all living things make up a planetary bioplasm; we are told that each of us is a hologram of the cosmos! That our thoughts influence

history. President George Bush senior frowns and the stock market drops fifty points!

The possibilities for living a highly conscious, highly actualized life are endless. Meditation, visualization, shamanism, biofeedback, right-brain enhancement, hemi-sync synthesizers, and a hundred other ways you can experience your higher self. All is Possible!

Now the problem is not emptiness but overwhelming possibility

The problem is: life is just too full, like a double-yoke egg. The endless possibility is a crushing demand on your life.

You may have met an Ontario man who goes by the name of Dr. Possibility- he has a sense of this. Or Auntie Mame: Life is a banquet. The Psalmist: My cup overflows. Our response: this is just too much! Information Overload. Possibility Overload.

What to do: what can I do with my life? I can't decide but this is an urgent decision. You just might miss out. You might miss your life. I had a friend with a PHD who slept 16 hours a day. He couldn't decide what to do with his doctorate. One day on the freeway he went to sleep at the wheel.

In the face of "What do I? there are two main flight patterns. The first one is flight by floating. In 1967 I left the religious order I was in. I had a new life possibility but didn't want to think about it. I bought a Ford Falcon with the big engine and went up and down the east coast of Australia for three months. A sympathetic friend suddenly said "Brian, you are messing up. Go and get yourself a job." I went up and down the east coast again.

This is called floating. I'll decide later. I need more data. You fill a file cabinet with clipping on world issues.

Or take a balloon flight: Northern Ireland... someone ought to do something
Aboriginals surviving in the garbage dumps; why doesn't someone
The Earths biosphere threatened
The education system has gone to the dogs
The health system is stressed to the bone

Elders are wasting away in despair
The prison system needs reform
Our neighbourhoods are shot to pieces
You could make a difference. Why don't...But the balloon keeps floating.
And it never lights down.

Cynicism is another escape. "People are just no good". "Life is really a pile" You can't trust anyone. At public meetings there are those who like to stop any worthwhile conversation. As soon as it looks like a proposal might go somewhere, out comes the "grenade" Hey, we tried that three years ago and it didn't work. Or there is the "professional" life-hater.

Another is waiting for the future: Waiting on Godot. Or Scarlett in Gone with the Wind "I'll think about that tomorrow"

Or the 101 flavors of ice cream dilemma: I once walked into one of those shops, inspected, got a sample of five or six, drove the attendant crazy. Walked out without buying one. Too much possibility!! How could I select one flavor?
Or you become a professional dilettante.

Yet the need for decision gnaws at your being.

The question What do I? is a question of historical thrust. Each of us has one chance to live a great life and die one great death. Imagine a Roman candle: you shoot it this way... that way...another way.... Woops, suddenly no more sparks. The candle is dead.

It is a question of suicide or cruciformity. Suicide: throw your life and energy away in sleep, distraction, or setting for something less than you are.
Cruciformity: committing your life and energy and death in a lifelong intentional vocation. A human being is a zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz of energy. Where direct it?

You and I possess only our death. We can put our life in the cannon and pull the trigger or we can let it dribble out. We can die once ingloriously or die gloriously every moment.

Over here, the nothingness of being calls for the acceptance of death. Over here, the fulness of being calls for the offering of death to history.

Each of us has only once around the clock. What are you and I going to do? Which drain am I going to pour my life down? Do I choose my destiny and grasp it every day of life or do I spend my life waiting for it? History beckons.

This has been a talk on the question of G-O-D.

It was Soren Kierkegaard, writing in the 1840's, who wrote:

“Whenever an external situation causes an internal crisis posing a life question from which we wish only to escape it is there that you and I encounter the question of the really real: the question of GOD.”

This is still true in our time; it has been true in every time, for every human being.

Brian Stanfield