Chancellor's Lectures 2010

Human nature, hope, and how to live now

Lecture Four, Tuesday 11 May

Welcome to the fourth and final of this year's Chancellor's lectures: *Human nature, hope, and how to live now.* I'm sure you'll be aware of the need for lecturers to come up with titles long before the lectures actually exist! So with me this year, and now that I have written the lectures, I'd like to change my mind! When I deliver these again in the autumn, in East Sussex, I'm minded to title them: *Violence, desire and hope – unravelling the mystery of being human.*

Let me know if you think that better captures what I've been saying, than what I came up with sometime in 2009. I've enjoyed conversations and comments made to me afterwards, or during the week; a suitable note on which to mention the question and answer session next Tuesday. Same time, but different location – in Vicars' Hall, just off the east end of the Cloisters. Do come if you'd like the chance to discuss any of the issues raised during the series. It would be ideal if you could e-mail me your question or comment, or leave it at the Cathedral Office. That'll increase the chance of me making a sensible response, but it's not required – I'm happy to have spontaneous questions and conversation on the night.

A summary of where we've got too: I've argued that our understanding of human nature is of more than academic interest. For example, the best strategies for achieving positive change for ourselves, and our world, will need to take into account what human beings are really like. That's why Plato gives his view of the human condition in the context of mapping out his ideal society, *The Republic*. Plato is where we started three weeks ago, and since then we've also explored what Jesus shows us about being human, Augustine's argument with Pelagius about sin, William Golding on the destructiveness of small boys and our primeval ancestors, Charles Darwin on natural selection and our similarity to other animals, Richard Dawkins on the 'selfish gene', and Steven Pinker on the interplay between what we inherit and our individual experience. Having done all that, last week we focussed our attention on violence and abuse – attempting a dialogue between secular and theological approaches, and finishing with Rene Girard's account of how mimetic desire leads victimisation.

And so to pulling these threads together and coming to a conclusion; not only about 'being human', but also about the possibility of realistic hope, both for ourselves and our world.

One of the questions I've referred to several times, is what (if anything) distinguishes human beings from animals. Amongst the answers we've had so far: the exercise of reason, the complexity of our language, the capacity for relationship with God, and our ability to rise above our genetic and evolutionary inheritance. You may remember Darwin plays *down* any supposed differences between us and animals, and that the contemporary figure most eloquently expressing this view is not Darwin's disciple Richard Dawkins, but the philosopher John Gray.

Tonight I'm going to start with Gray, who's spent much of his career eloquently arguing for two key points, both of which I ultimately disagree with, for all the stimulation, indeed provocation, I find in his work. These two points are as follows:

- Human beings are not central to the world, nor radically different from other animals.

- The hope of progress in our world is an illusion.

Gray is clear about the responsibility for, in his view, falsely seeing humans as different from animals, and falsely believing in the possibility of progress. The source of these errors, he says, is the Christian faith; and although Christianity is now marginalised (in Western societies, anyway) its wrongheaded ideas are more prevalent than ever. This is because they're now propagated by secular humanists who, although, hostile to religion, accept assumptions derived from Christianity. Humanists often don't realise this is what they're doing, precisely because they've made a virtue of being ignorant about theology.

For those at least sympathetic to a religious sensibility, Gray is a writer who both encourages and unsettles. *Encourages*, in describing humanists such as Dawkins as 'secular believers… in the grip of unexamined dogmas' while crediting religious believers with being 'more free thinking'[1] and having a better understanding of human frailty. On the other hand he *unsettles* in castigating Christianity for the pernicious idea that salvation can be achieved in history; that history is a battle between good and evil, and good will win. This is pernicious, he says, between it encourages people and governments to strive for impossible visions, utopias that can never be, prepared to use any means to achieve them. He regularly cites what has happened and continues to happen in Iraq, and the obvious falsity of assuming freedom and democracy could be exported into that country via the use of force.

[1] John Gray (2002) *Straw Dogs* London: Granta, page xi

Gray's point is that whether or not you believe in the dogmas of Christianity, both religious and secular thinkers tend to agree that the world can be remade through human action. Gray is happy to accept that belief in progress can be a civilizing force, as in the abolition of slavery. But the same beliefs, he points out, also fuelled the worst aspects of Communism and colonialism, and in our own day, the so-called 'war on terror'.

Human beings, says Gray, will never be the wholly rational animals some scientists and humanists believe they can become. Technology and knowledge increase, yes, but these are not benign, as many choose to believe. 'Knowledge advances,' he argues, 'while the human animal stays the same. *Homo rapiens* will not cease to be predatory and destructive, nor will *Homo religiosus* cease to pursue the intimations of faith.' On *Homo rapiens*, a shorthand Gray has presumably constructed from the Latin for robbery, plundering and pillage ('rapine' in English), it must be granted that technology is used both for medical advancement, and developing new weapons of destruction. And on *Homo religiosus*, Gray not only refers to the widespread prevalence of religion across the world, but also that human beings generally are governed not so much by reason, as by their 'myths' – that is the stories we tell themselves and shape their lives by. For him, the modern secular myth that 'human life can be altered at will', and of inevitable progress, is also an 'intimation of faith' and the most damaging of all.

Most of my summary of Gray has focused on his assault on the idea of progress, rather than on what he says about our exaggerated sense of difference from other animals. But for him these two are connected, as our false sense of being uniquely free and autonomous, encourages our utopian illusions. Contemporary people like to talk about choice, when in fact most of what we do is 'unchosen'. We don't get up in the morning, and from then until evening continually scan series after series of options, before selecting one. Mainly we follow custom and habit, doing similar things to the day before without agonizing about it. Just as we carry on breathing without consciously trying to, so with most of our lives.

I've spent a few minutes discussing John Gray, because he brings the issues at the heart of this lecture series into sharp focus. He is clear that we, whether religious or humanist, go on far too much about our freedom and uniqueness as a species, and fall prey far too easily to acting destructively in pursuit of utopian dreams of progress. Gray wants us to be more realistic and truthful, and to hope for less. I have qualified sympathy with his viewpoint, perhaps partly because of the occasional unexpected comment he makes, such as 'poetry and religion are more realistic guides to life' than science and technology. But in disagreement with

Gray, I want to try and set out where our distinctiveness as human animals really does lie, and why we can be more ambitious in what we hope for than he allows.

So first, let's tackle this tricky area of human distinctiveness, as compared to the rest of the animal kingdom. For me, the key lies in human use of reason and language and creativity, to *affect and change our environment*. We have shaped our environment into what we now call 'society' or 'culture'. Yes, there are animals that form themselves into societies – bees and termites and weaver birds, for example. All of these construct things, as do beavers and wasps. But what they do not have is *history*; a story of change and innovation that can be dated and told and written down. Here we are in the realm of Richard Dawkins' 'memes' where ideas and techniques develop and are spread far more quickly than in the genetically driven process of evolution.

Human beings may be creatures of habit, often resisting change, but we also inevitably do things differently over time. In the realm of buildings and architecture, for example, Christopher Wren and Frank Lloyd Wright and Sir Norman Foster have had a major impact in changing the design of our cities – but there has been no bee equivalent altering the design of the hive or the honeycomb. Nor is there any comparison to the development to our political system, with the instruments of law, justice, and democracy emerging over centuries – in evolutionary terms, a blink of an eyelid.

Can you imagine a future where we say to one another, 'Now, finally, we understand how to bring up a child, design a house, run a school, and organise an economy – all we have to do from now on is copy and repeat and imitate'? Where we say, 'the age of criticism and innovation is over. No new music or books are to be written, we have quite enough already.' Does this sound enticing? I suspect not, but even if it did, it won't happen, for in the words of Rowan Williams, 'we [human beings] work on our world in what seems an insatiable desire for new perception and new possibilities of action. All of which is perhaps only another way of saying that we are conscious of living in time, with memory and hope…'.[2]

Many human innovations, such as in architecture, go way beyond what is strictly functional or useful, and if there are limits to what might be done we haven't reached them yet. Birdsong is beautiful, but there has been no avian Mozart or Stravinsky or Britten, responding to their musical inheritance and yet seeking to offer something new. And in the realm of art we come closest to creativity that is not related to practical use, and yet somehow essential for our functioning. Our

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[2] Rowan Williams (2000) *On Christian Theology,* Oxford: Blackwell, p199

ancestors had cave painters, and buried their dead with ritual. Through art, broadly defined (from music to painting to literature to film to making things) human beings seek to enlarge and explore their existence. Hold the following thought: human beings are pre-eminent amongst the animals as makers of signs and symbols and stories.

I say hold the thought, because it will become important for the final part of this lecture. I have tried to map out my own view, against Gray, of what is about human beings that is distinctive in relation to other animals. And just as Gray's downplaying of hope is related to his conviction that we are more similar to other animals than we care to admit, my case for being more hopeful than he is, is similarly related to what I've said about the human sense of history, innovation and imagination.

But before I come to the boil in making my case for hope, I propose to do two things that will contribute to my final argument: first, reflect on what we've learnt about human nature through an example, that although trivial, is nonetheless revealing – the making of New Year's resolutions. Second, briefly considering the method and content of a Church of England Doctrine Commission report on 'being human' which focuses on *power, money, sex and time*.

So then, let's consider New Year's resolutions. To define my terms: a *resolution* is a decision or determination to achieve something, and many use the beginning of a new calendar year to address a perceived deficiency in their life. Let's take a couple of examples – one person decides to lose some weight, and another to read more books. How easy or difficult are they likely to find achieving these? The perspectives I've explored on human nature suggest the going is likely to be tough. For a start, human beings are prone to self-deception, and so may well underestimate the difficulties involved. We tend, for example, to be bound into habitual patterns of behaviour, and changing those habits is not easily done. And since we are better at seeing specks in other people's eyes than logs in our own, the identification of what our new year's resolution should in the first place, is likely to be flawed. By what criteria have dieting or reading been chosen?

Just about every thinker on the human condition has concluded that we're characterised by internal complexity and conflict, although this has been described in many different ways, from Plato's reason, appetite and spirit; to Dawkins' 'selfish genes'; Pinker's mixture of heritability, experience and environment; and Augustine's memory, intelligence and will. We've also explored the ways in which our capacities are impaired and disoriented. All of this suggests that an act of will, a resolution, will often be undermined from within. In any event,

Augustine and Girard have showed us the importance of *desire* in human life. If the intention to 'read more' is based on an 'ought', rather than something we really deep down want, it will never be achieved. But then again, desire is not sufficient in itself either, as what we want may be completely unrealistic, or entirely contrary to our temperament and abilities. Part of the rather cruel entertainment of reality television is regularly demonstrating that a desire to be a pop star can co-exist with a genetic inheritance conferring no evident musical ability.

So far this has all been rather individualistic. When I discussed the Christian understanding of being created in the 'image of God', I concluded that while this implied human beings had great gifts and ability to do things, the fundamental meaning was a capacity for relationship – both with other people, and with God. And this evening I've spoken about the importance of culture and society, that is networks of interconnected relationships.

The chance of achieving a new year's resolution, therefore, greatly increases if we involve other people; first in deciding on what to resolve, and then in carrying it through. And if the people we involve have gifts of wisdom and discernment, so much the better. If our wannabe reader joins a book group, and our dieter joins Weight Watchers, this is an intelligent move. Supportive relationships with those who want what we want, within a structure informed by collective wisdom and experience, will give us the best chance of getting somewhere: always assuming that the original resolution wasn't hopefully misconceived in the first place. There is at least a chance we can shift our habitual patterns of living in the way we hoped, although we're likely to continue to need that supportive group for a long, time; perhaps always.

In 2003 a report attempted to distil the collective wisdom of the Church of England on 'Being Human'.[3] The fifteen members of the Doctrine Commission chose to focus on what they identified as four key areas of human life: power, money, sex and time. These areas, they argue, are key to living life as God intended; these are the areas we would be making resolutions about. I am interested in their method as much as the content, so let me attempt a summary

The report begins with the short Biblical text chosen to illustrate their strategy. It's simply this – 'Jesus increased in wisdom' from the final verse of chapter two in Luke's Gospel. From it they draw out four things:

1. That in everything they say, Jesus is their reference point for what it means to be

[3] The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England (2003) *Being Human – A Christian understanding of personhood illustrated with reference to power, money, sex and time* London: Church House Publishing

human, and the Scriptures which tell of Jesus are a continual resource.
2. That they're seeking *wisdom*, as distinguished from sheer information or knowledge. Wisdom, they argue, is about drawing out understanding and insight in a manner that helps us 'to live well before God alongside other people in our world.' The very term *homo sapiens* means 'wise humanity', after all.
3. They recognize that being human is an unfinished project, a journey, as we continually seek to increase in wisdom.
4. The Bible not only provides their text, but is itself a rich distillation of wisdom.

Such is their starting point for exploring the four key areas they identify, areas all central to articulating how we can 'live well' in the contemporary world. These areas – power, money, sex and time, are not specifically 'religious' categories. In each case what the report does is engage with contemporary views and assumptions, and then sketch out an *alternative perception* based on wisdom from the Christian tradition.

So, for example, the report starts with power. Last week I focussed on the adult abuse of power in relation to children, which is just one example of how power tends to be seen in negative terms in our society. 'The abuse of power' is the phrase that comes to mind, whether we are talking about politicians, bankers, journalists or the police. The report sets out a more positive way of viewing power. Suspicion of power is justified, they say, but is not the whole story. The 'God of power and might' has given all human beings powers that *can* be used self-critically and in serving others. Through the lens of Christ, his death and his resurrection, we come to see God's power as declared 'most chiefly in showing mercy and pity'[4] which should caution anyone seeking even a good outcome through coercion.

The report argues that power is not intrinsically corrupt. Nor is money or sex. But what is needed in all these areas is a 'truthful moral imagination'; and not only an acknowledgement of our capacity for self-deception, but a specific willingness to accept admonishment and criticism.

And so the report moves on to money. This, it says, is a human invention with many positive features. But when it 'becomes a mostly invisible controlling force in our lives, then it is time for the wise to take notice.'[5] And then again follows a description of an alternative perception based on Christian wisdom, which they give the term 'money-discipleship', a discipline involving the learning of spiritual and practical habits within a supportive community.

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[4] Collect for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, *Book of Common Prayer*
[5] *Being Human* p9

You will have got the method by now. The report sketches an alternative perception of sex, assuming its goodness and joy, but alert to the various sexual developments in our culture which are tested for their wisdom or foolishness. And finally the rather abstract sounding concept of *time* is tackled. Time, like power, is seen as a gift from God, open to abuse and waste. The alternative perception set out is of time itself redeemed by Jesus Christ. The minutes, hours and days of our life are not to be dominated by clocks and a sense of time 'running out', but in nurturing habits of attentiveness and joy. Here *worship* is shown not to be a 'spare time' activity, but rather something that opens to us the 'time of our lives' through fostering the wisdom, hope and faithfulness we need.

Through all this the message that human life is a continuing project, never complete, comes through loud and clear. What the Doctrine Commission does is to offer their perception of the direction the human project should be heading. They agree, then, with what was said earlier in this lecture about the impossibility of human life consisting only of repetition, with every aspect of society so perfect no innovation was needed. Insofar as we can imagine perfection, it is variously named: 'utopia', 'nirvana', 'heaven' or 'the Kingdom of God', and we are capable both of longing for it, and worrying that life there would be monotonous and boring.

Certainly, however, every perspective we've considered is dissatisfied with human existence as it is, and wants to get us somewhere else. The human condition is variously diagnosed as damaged, flawed, and needy. The question is, how are we to make the transition from where we are, to where we want to be? Now that the Doctrine Commission has sketched out its perception of human life informed by Christian wisdom, how do they imagine this might be achieved? Simply by reading their report? Of course not. But what, then?

Earlier I encouraged you to hold the thought that human beings are pre-eminent amongst the animals as makers of signs and symbols and stories. And through these things we reflect on our past and our present and seek to re-order what we've been given; re-mould ourselves in a way that will take us forward. We employ sculptors and artists for everything from war memorials, to works outside football stadiums. In a related way our public life is full of ritual actions, from Remembrance Day, to the national anthem and football chants at the World Cup, to the way meetings of Weight Watchers and book groups are organised. Perhaps, then, we could use the human propensity for signs and symbols to construct some rites of transition; some public, communal actions to help us move from where we are, to where we want to be. If we could, this would tell us something about hope.

Strangely enough, such ‘rites of transition’ already exist. In church language, they are called ‘sacraments’. Their purpose, wrote Thomas Aquinas, is ‘to make human beings holy’. The sacrament of baptism is a clear example. In illustrating this, I am going to quote the *Book of Common Prayer*, for it’s bracingly frank where our modern liturgies are more circumspect:

> Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin, and that our Saviour Christ saith, none can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of Water and of the Holy Ghost; I beseech you to call upon God the Father, though our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he will grant to this Child that thing which by nature he cannot have…

There are then prayers rehearsing what Rowan Williams calls ‘stories of transition and rescue’, from Noah and the flood, to Moses leading the Israelites from slavery to freedom, to Jesus’ death and resurrection. In baptism, all that is impaired and damaged in human life is symbolically ‘put to death’, to be superseded by the new life given by the resurrected Christ. The service ends with the duties of the baptized and their godparents spelled out: ‘Baptism doth represent unto us our profession; which is, to follow the example of our Saviour Christ and to be made like unto him.’ In daily life this means, ‘continually mortifying all our evil and corrupt affections, and daily proceeding in all virtue and godliness of living.’

Here is a direct way of expressing the Doctrine Commission’s insistence on the need for a supportive community, if we are grow in the spiritual and practical habits we need. And there is another ‘rite of transition’ I want to refer to, via the slightly oblique route of a book on justice. Though not so oblique, perhaps, given that I’m in search of the grounds for hope, and the possibility of a just world is a key part of this.

In 2008, Nicholas Sagovsky, Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey, published a fine book: *Christian Tradition and the Practice of Justice*.[6] And while his book is wide-ranging, from the ancient Greeks to the twentieth century American philosopher John Rawls, its final chapter (and arguably its heart) is on ‘Justice and the Eucharist’. The focus is on the Eucharist, Holy Communion, because this is the sacrament that defines the identity of the people of God, the Church. To participate in the Eucharist, writes Sagovsky, is to place yourself ‘within the dynamic whereby the Church prays and hopes, acts and suffers for the coming of God’s justice.’ Such *participation* will in turn invite responsible *action* in the

[6] Nicholas Sagovsky (2008) *Christian Tradition and the Practice of Justice* London: SPCK

service of justice.

The assumption behind all of this is that the Jesus who taught his followers to pray 'thy kingdom come' was deeply concerned with justice. To spell this out a little: by 'justice' Sagovsky means three things:

- Action for meeting human need
- Action that makes for freedom
- Action in accordance with a system of law that commands assent.

Action for meeting human need is the most straightforward of these. Jesus' encounters people with specific needs for physical and mental health, for food and drink. He feeds the hungry, heals the sick, and offers forgiveness and reintegration into society, – inviting his followers to share in this work.

Then, action that makes for freedom. Nowadays it can sound as though the meaning of freedom is being able to choose between ten types of toothpaste. Jesus, however, wanted human life to take place in an environment suitable for its flourishing. Rooted as he was in the creative freedom of God, he wanted to give people the freedom to live 'life in all its fullness'. Paradoxically, he achieved this most of all in *giving up* his own freedom, to suffering and death. God then raises Jesus from death to life, and subsequently does the same for those united with him. It's this act of God, full of potential for further new life, that's at the heart of the Eucharist.

And finally, action in accordance with a system of law that commands assent. Sagovsky argues that although Jesus sometimes challenges the religious and political powers of his day, he does so only when those powers are being abused. He said he'd come *not* to 'abolish the law and the prophets', but to 'fulfil' them (Matthew 5.17). Sagovsky here has the same approach as the Doctrine Commission report we examined earlier. Both religious and political authority are gifts of God. Their existence is right and proper, but not if they're unjust or corrupt. Christians, therefore, from a perception of how authority *should* be exercised, can rightly work for the integrity of public life in general, and in particular for a body of law that commands assent because it is just.

These three different aspects of Jesus' ministry are encountered in the Eucharist in two ways: through close attention to Scripture, and in the sharing of bread and wine 'in remembrance of him'. In these ways, writes Sagovsky, the Eucharist 'provides an extraordinarily powerful dynamic in the struggle for justice'. One way of expressing its power is by pointing out its dual celebration of a Messiah who *dies*,

and a Messiah who *lives*. Because it is about the death of Jesus, those participating in the Eucharist can never forget the difficulty and cost of establishing God's justice.

On the other hand, because the Eucharist is, and here I quote Sagovsky, a 'celebration of a *living Lord*, it offers an inextinguishable hope for the coming of the reign of God's justice.' A 'living Lord' because, through the action of the Holy Spirit, receiving bread and wine becomes a genuine encounter with the presence of Christ. And through this encounter, participants are to be empowered to live Christ-like lives. This does not mean wooden adherence to the letter of the law, but the freeing of human will and desire so that these are attuned to the will and desire of God.

The one area I would want to qualify what Sagovsky says, is that at times he makes it sound as though human transformation is easily achieved. Alastair McFadyen is more realistic.[7] In reflecting on original sin, abuse and the holocaust, he too ends his book with a chapter on worship. For him this does not mean any quick overcoming of our internal contradictions and impairments. Rather it's about seeing the reality of sin within the context of what he calls 'the superabundance of a God of joy'. Only in such a context, he argues, are we likely to begin taking responsibility for our share in the human condition. The 'superabundance of life' found in God, he says, is such that even the distortions of human life can be drawn into the dynamics of 'universal salvation'.

John Gray, you will remember, argued that 'Knowledge advances… while the human animal stays the same' – and that dreaming of utopias only encourages inhuman means in pursuing them. I beg to differ. Earlier I identified the distinctiveness of the human animal, and pointed to our sense of *history*; that human beings have a collective memory of change and innovation that can be dated and told and written down. We have a sense of past, present and future, and through signs and stories can imagine how things might be different. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this capacity, just as there is nothing intrinsically wrong with power, sex, money or time. But as with every aspect of human life, it can be used for good and ill.

Gray *is* right to point to the huge cost of past false utopias, and the temptation to see the ends as justifying the means. He is also right to say that while knowledge and technology increase, human beings stay the same. What he does not fully take into account, however, is threefold:

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[7] As it happens, McFadyen is current a member of the Doctrine Commission himself.

1. The existence of what Christians call 'saints'; inspiring examples of people who, while remaining frail human beings, transcend our capacity for violence and selfishness. The current 'saint' of choice is Nelson Mandela, but history is littered with people who inspire and in so doing challenge counsels of despair.
2. The human capacity for developing institutions and ways of doing things seeking to compensate for human frailty and self-deception. Yes of course our criminal justice system and democratic structures are far from perfect - yet the achievement of universal suffrage, and the abolition of the lynch mob, shouldn't be underestimated either.
3. The Church, for all its frailty, is a structure for 'making people holy'. In itself it is nothing, its value lying only in being a channel for the wisdom of God seen in Christ, and a community centred on his dieing and rising. As Girard points out, its central story brings into the light all that is worst about the human condition, and precisely in so doing offers a hopeful way forward. Secular humanism has borrowed and distorted Christian ideas, but not as yet, the Eucharist. There is plenty for a Christian perspective to bring to a dialogue with the disciplines of science and psychology and literature and philosophy, from all of which I've enjoyed learning during these lectures.

I'm tempted to give the last word to Thomas Hardy, who wrote, 'if a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst.' That's a pretty good summary of the Gospel. But being the man he was, Hardy had to include that 'if'. For myself, there *is* a way to the better, and I'm persuaded by it precisely because it takes a full look at the worst. For an evocation of walking hopefully on that way, I give the last word not to Hardy, but to Augustine of Hippo:

> So now, my brethren, let us sing, not to delight our leisure, but to ease our toil. In the way that travellers are in the habit of singing, sing, but keep on walking… Go onward always – but go onward in goodness, for there are… some people who go ever onward from bad to worse. If you are going onward, you are walking; but always go onward in goodness, onward in the right faith, onward in good habits and behaviour. Sing, and walk onwards.[8]

For the last time this year, thank you for your attendance and your attention.

[8] Sermon 256