

“FROM ONE BEGINNING TO ANOTHER”

A START-OF-YEAR CHAPLAINCY THOUGHT FOR THE MONTH: OCTOBER 2022 by Nick Sissons

Full transcript.

Bore da pawb. Nick Sissons dw i. Dw i'n gweithio fel caplan yn y Brifysgol yma ym Mangor.

Hi I'm Nick Sissons, and I'm one of the Chaplains here at Bangor University and I want to talk to you today about the change and the disruption that comes at the beginning of an academic year or at the start of a new phase in our life.

I was watching the Queen's funeral the other day and I noticed that the same poem was used both in Westminster Abbey and in the afternoon committal service at Windsor, a poem by John Donne called 'Our Last Awakening' and it goes like this:

*'Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity: in the habitations of thy majesty and glory, world without end.'*

Now whether you believe in heaven or not, to talk about heaven gives human beings the ability to express what a perfect world would be like and in John Donne's perfect world there are certain things that will be missing, and they're a series of opposites: darkness and dazzling will not be there in heaven, noise and silence won't be there, fears and hopes won't be there, ends and beginnings won't be there. Because for John Donne all these things bring about disruption and change.

And you and I know from our experience of life that this is true of life on earth; it's a constant series of ends and beginnings. And the academic year is just one more of those. But I want to suggest that actually change and disruption can be very creative and positive experiences, and far from wanting to do away with them or run away from them, we ought to embrace them and the uncertainty that they bring.

There's a scene in the adventures of Alice in Wonderland where she gets lost in the woods and finds a Cheshire Cat sitting on the bough of a tree, and she asks the cat how to get out of the wood. And the cat says 'Where are you trying to get to?' and Alice says 'I don't really care.' 'Well,' says the cat, 'it doesn't really matter which direction you go in.'

And at the start of an academic year there's a bit of Alice in each of us: we're lost, we're not certain of the way ahead. But unlike Alice I think we do care about the direction we're heading in. We're not just drifting through our lives; we've each got a course to follow, a qualification to acquire, a career to pursue. But just because we know the direction we want to head in, doesn't mean that we're in control of how we'll get there. Things don't always pan out the way we want them to; we need to be flexible, we need to be adaptive. But these times are times of uncertainty and change. They're what psychologists call 'liminal phases' - it's like we're stepping over the threshold, going through a strange door, and none of us know what's on the other side; and that's the case for first years who've never been to university, but it's the case for graduates, it's the case for staff, anyone who's new. But even those of us who've been here for many years, this year is a new year, we haven't travelled this part of the journey before, everything is uncertain.

And at the moment, after Covid, with the loss of the Queen, the longest reigning monarch, and with all the accelerated changes of modern technological life, we've found ourselves in what some people have called a 'space between two worlds': a world that has gone and that isn't coming back, and a world that nobody knows what it's going to look like. And so these are quite

disorientating and scary times, but that doesn't mean we run away, it doesn't mean we try to go back to the certainties of our past.

I'm filming this today in my mum's house; I'm visiting her for a few days and whenever I come home I'm surrounded by reminders of my past: photographs of me as a child, or as a student, or as a husband; and nostalgia, this longing for the past, can often have a really nasty grip on our lives, even though we all of us know that there is only one direction that we can live our lives and that's moving forwards. So I want to suggest that when we come to these times of change and uncertainty, we cultivate the virtue of gratitude as something which will keep us steady through these times.

This is the season of gratitude in the Church, because its Harvest time, and Harvest above all is thanking God for the good things that we've received. And I want to suggest that at this moment of transition you have a strong sense of gratitude to the people who have helped you get where you are now, those who have loved you and cared for you and supported you; that you have a real strong sense of gratitude for the experiences that you've had, even if they've been difficult ones, but the ones that have shaped you and moulded you into who you are now. And also that you have a deep sense of gratitude for the places, the secure and safe places which have given you the confidence and the strength to move out beyond them into unknown situations.

At Harvest time I always give away this book, its called 'Gratitude' and it was written by Oliver Sacks. And Oliver Sacks was a neurologist and he died in 2015 of an incurable cancer. And he, in his lifetime, faced all kinds of discrimination and disruption and change and setbacks, and yet when he comes to the end of his life, he wants to say this:

*'I cannot pretend I am without fear, but my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved, I have been given much and I have given something in return, I have read and travelled and thought and written. Above all I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.'*

I hope that we each have a deep sense of gratitude for those people, places and experiences that have got us thus far. But I also hope we'll have a deep sense of gratitude for the uncertain times, the transitional times, the liminal moments that we are now going through, which we mustn't run away from, nor seek safety in the familiar and the predictable; but we sit in these moments, we wait, we listen and we learn from them, because these could be the most creative and positive experiences in our life so far, that will shape the kind of person we're going to be in the future. So that when we get to the end of our life, however long or short that may be, we can express the same powerful sense of gratitude that Oliver Sacks was able to express just weeks before he died.

I hope you have a wonderful academic year. Bye bye.