



Sermons: On Some Items in the Wren Misunderstanding and Mystery

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Isaiah 55: 6–11 Luke 20: 20–36

More photos were taken in 2015 than in the previous history of photography.

That would be an extraordinary fact. Except it isn't true. Well, not exactly. The author of this fact created it to make a point about the complexity of trying to reach approximate estimates in the absence of solid data.¹ It does, however, illuminate a problem we are all grappling with, individually, as a society and politically.

The problem of human exchange in a globalised world that will soon top eight billion individuals. Eight billion individual people who aren't necessarily that keen on being approximately estimated, but would rather be acknowledged and understood by someone. Eight billion people who, metaphorically and often literally, want someone to react to their picture of cheesecake.

The challenge of exchange, perhaps more crudely of communication, has always existed. In many religious and myth traditions there is the moment when one becomes two. A moment when the individual is given the extraordinary ability to transcend *their* individuality and become more than themselves, precisely because there is another who is not-them. But a moment also when meaning first fails to leap across the gap and misunderstanding and contest arises.

Arguably the greatest challenge of our age is, therefore, communication. Because it sits at the heart of everything else we need to do.

There is the superficial – if incredibly important – challenge of the tools and means of twenty-first century communication. These range from the radical exposure of the individual to an often unintermediated public via social media, to the growing use and sophistication of deep-fake technology, to algorithms that increasingly curate the way we think and feel.

I call them superficial because sitting underneath this sound and fury reverberating through each of our lives, every day, is something more simple and more complex. What does it mean to be an individual human in the context of eight billion individual humans.

What our answer to that question is has, perhaps, never been more important. Although the question and pointers hesitatingly offered this evening are not new. The challenge is one of scale not substance.

¹ <https://www.ben-evans.com/benedictevans/2015/8/19/how-many-pictures>

There are many quips about diplomacy, the profession I had spent most of my career in prior to coming back to Cambridge. One of the most famous is ‘the art of letting someone else have your way.’ Less cynically at its apogee diplomacy exists to avoid the use of hard power. To convince one set of individuals that other individuals have both a case to be heard and inherent value.

At the limit of this definition of diplomacy, can diplomacy even be defined as soft *power*? Or is diplomacy rather the creation and maintenance of commons to avoid the use of any power, when power is defined as an act by one individual or group of individuals against another used with coercive intent.

Diplomatic negotiations are littered with phrases and tools. Three that are relevant here are confidence building measures, carve-outs and the dreaded zero-sum game.

The first is obvious. Confidence building measures are designed to show that it is possible to work together. There is something beyond our difference that we can share and benefit from.

The second is the acknowledgement that there are often things so contentious, so complicated, so impregnable to explanation and persuasion that if there is to be any dialogue they must be removed. Parked. Carved-out. At least for a period. That all parties must simply agree to disagree. And, crucially, in doing so, free themselves to focus on what is common.

The greatest challenge to all of this – arguably the Vanishing Spell for diplomacy, when it is framed as the art of creating the commons, the spaces we share, rather than the silver-tongued agents of power – is the zero-sum game.

If you fundamentally believe that the common is finite then your gain is my loss or if not mine, then someone else’s. There can be no true collaboration, only different forms of competition.

As we look at many of the conflicts of today it would be easy to conclude that there is only a zero-sum game. There is no doubt that some of the greatest challenges we need to navigate are based on the finite resources of a finite planet.

What is curious though is how debates framed in this way span completely different categories of problem. Identity, access to water and freedom of speech speak to three very different concepts of the individual in relation to the common, but are united in their regular delineation as zero-sum games. Perhaps even more curious, and disturbing, is the way in which some protagonists on all sides of these debates – debates which could find space for common ground, through carve-outs and confidence building measures – seem instead proactively to seek the relocation of complex and abstract notions into spaces that are *physically finite*, precisely to ensure that they can only be treated as zero-sum.

It is not a necessity to locate the general in the particular. That relocation – indeed incarnation – of concepts or social norms into specific, finite spaces is a choice. And it is an act that consciously strips the other, whichever other, of the inherent capacity to be more than one side of a binary. You are with us or against us on that tiny, zero-sum space, and *therefore on everything*.

In diplomacy this is precisely the reason there are carve-outs, because once a complex negotiation collapses into a spatio-temporal binary that zero-sum will infect the entire system rendering a new common almost impossible, *unless it is, for a period, deliberately carved-out*.

What is going on? And, perhaps more importantly, what can we do? Fortunately, as I said at the start, this is not a new problem.

Back in the late 14th century, most probably in Westminster someone sat down to illuminate the manuscript of the Apocalypse which is today's object from the Wren. Not much appears to have been written about it and the little Nicolas Bell, the Wren Librarian, could find it terse, functional and not terribly complimentary. Far more humble than the famous Trinity Apocalypse. There is no gold. The illuminations aren't especially well composed and it looks like the artist had recently been given a large paint box and was keen to try out every colour. So what kept bringing me back to it given the many far more exceptional manuscripts in Trinity's collection? It was the way that these often crude paintings consistently illuminated the text. In one case I simply googled what I saw and was taken straight to the precise verse in Revelation which it depicted. That is the one I've chosen for this evening.

There are three figures on the right. Two are the many-headed Beast and Dragon. But it is the third that I couldn't forget. He's a rather insouciant grey-furred chap. His hoofed legs crossed, one hand on his knee and the other at his hip. And on his long, Scooby-Doo face, peering out at us from across the centuries, is the barely suppressed yawn of the armchair pundit. He is the most deliciously drawn caricature, holding court from his pink ottoman, expecting us all to listen. Doubtlessly, while he tells us precisely why Fulham lost to Manchester City in yesterday's penalty shoot-out, explains why the Bank of England interest-rate increases are not how he – or anyone who remotely understood monetary policy – would handle the British economy, and for a brief couple of years gave us quite exceptional epidemiological insights.

He is, indeed, the False Prophet. And one can only imagine whom the monk who drew him was thinking of to capture such a perfect attitudinal likeness.

So who is the False Prophet according to Revelation – that psychodrama for all times?

The False Prophet exercises authority, mainly through signs, but also by marking everyone on the hand or forehead, so that only those who are marked can participate in economic exchange [Revelation 13.12]: that haunting symbol of authoritarian control that reduces the individual to an indelible binary: insider or outsider: included or excluded.

If we look again at the manuscript. We have power, authority and control. And yet, what is that coming out of the mouths of the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet? Frogs. Or, rather, foul spirits like frogs, who will go to the Kings of the world and assemble them for battle.

But why frogs? In this illumination the lowering, determined faces of the Dragon and the smug hauteur of False Prophet are rendered quite ridiculous by tiny, black frogs, their legs splayed to break the fall as they tumble out of their mouths.

Stephan Witetschek, while at the Divinity Faculty, explored exactly this question. Looking at what frogs symbolised in Greek and Jewish literature he concluded that frogs were 'mostly thought of as disgusting and as exemplarily silly', as he goes on: 'even if the powers that John represents by his beast imagery are still in charge, the audience has already been given an apocalyptic – revealing, unveiling, unmasking – glimpse of their true character, and a liberating laugh about them.'

In complex times humour matters. It not only enables us to endure oppression – a criticism that has led some to blame humour for limiting protest – it psychologically arms us against otherwise overwhelming fear, precisely so that we can act.

And humour also humanises. It cuts us all down to size. The mighty beasts and the dragon who have been described in the most lurid terms, ultimately can do little more than bring forth – frogs. Humour is David's tiny stone hitting square in the forehead of the Goliath of power or pride that makes exclusive claims.

But is there anything, other than humour, can we turn to when confronted by those who try to trap us, constrain our ability to find new ways of flourishing with and beyond difference?

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus faces those sent by his enemies to try to trip him up, to get him to say something he shouldn't, flush out whose side he's really on. But it is they who are both unmasked and deceived because in trying to trick Jesus into a zero-sum game, they make a fundamental category error. They fail to account for the dual life that is open to us all. As Jesus says to them you can be both: and, rendering unto Caesar and unto God, both a child of this world subject to its identities such as husband or wife, and one of the children of God beyond any such identifiers. A paradox St Paul returns to regularly [c.f. Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 13:12], enabled because, as we heard earlier, God's thoughts are not our thoughts [Isaiah 55:9].

This is the power of the apophatic, of the point where mystery carves out space for misunderstanding. As G.K. Chesterton says, 'The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The ... logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid.'

It is the mystery of divine love, George Herbert's the heaven in ordinary, which John spoke of last week, that creates the space for misunderstanding to be navigated and new collective approaches to our temporal life to be explored. We cannot be caught in a zero-sum trap when we can seek restoration in an infinite Love.

But what does any of this mean? Much of the time we just want to get through the day, while vaguely wishing there was something we could do. So here are three pointers illuminated in the manuscript before you:

- There is only one certainty each of us can have about ourselves and that is that our perspective qua individual is finite and therefore anything we think, do or say is limited, open to misunderstanding and cannot be wholly true.
- That fallibility is common to all of us, so anyone who *tells* you they know the answers and that they alone are right, probably doesn't and certainly isn't.
- And amid the clamour from all directions of icy, rebarbative certainty is the croaking of frogs.

As St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: We know that 'all of us possess knowledge'. But knowledge puffs up, while love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him. [1 Corinthians 8:1–2] This clamouring and complicated world needs people like you to find new ways to address the problem of the commons. New ways that work for people and planet. That has never been easy. In every generation the Beast, the Dragon and the False Prophet lurk, and you will need resilience.

So don't forget those silly, silhouetted frogs. And laugh. At yourself, at our *common* weaknesses, and at the extraordinary fact we are each alive. All eight billion of us. Laugh not to diminish yourself or others. Laugh so you have the strength to love. Because, sometimes, there is only misunderstanding and mystery. The mystery of the divine Love we all participate in, the infinite common. And the misunderstanding that starts and can never cease the moment we step back out into individuality. And our job, in whatever humble way we can, our job is to heal the wound between the two.