A short walk

Let me invite you on a 15 minute walk. Traditionally, English walks stop at a pub. Alas! But we will have a different treat. In about 10 minutes Martha Ellen Zenfell will read us her poem “The tunnel at the end of the light”. Then I’ll bring us home.

Wesley’s spotless glory and crowns describe heaven. A different imagining may speak to you: if so, welcome it. For me it is God wiping every tear from our eyes. If you associate heaven with nothingness, let nothingness come to your mind. Here’s where we’ll return and, who knows, maybe see the place anew.

But now we’re off – down Jacob’s ladder (this is St Martin’s so the lift isn’t working) – and to earth with a bump. We’ve arrived at a farm: a farm with a prodigal daughter.

A new story: the prodigal daughter

A woman owned an estate which she farmed with the help of her three grown children. The oldest two were hard-working. Every morning they got up early to tend the crops. By dinner time both were exhausted. But the eldest would work into the night keeping the books, checking that the family had enough to get by. His name was Managerialism.

As for the middle child, she took her dinner and any spare food from the kitchen and went far and wide, sharing her food with anyone who might need it. She and her elder brother argued over how much the family really did need to get by. The brother saw a world full of uncertainties; besides which, everything in the larder had been earned by hard work. The middle child saw a world of desperate present needs. Her name was Generosity.

The youngest child was unlike these two. Her name was Laughter. She got up late, got bored easily, and made light of whatever happened on the farm, even if others had worked hard on it.

So, for the older siblings it was a relief when one day the youngest took her share of the family’s wealth and left. She wanted to be a stand-up comic, and moved from town to town with some success. Armed with the money she earned and the wealth she had brought with her, she had an enjoyable time. It was carefree and fun.

Things were not so happy at home. Managerialism and Generosity were angry that their mother had let one-third of the estate go to waste. But they disagreed on what would not be a waste. One day they were so mad with argument that they asked their mother to cut her best robe in two, because they could not agree whether to mend it or sell it; but she refused.

Some years later hard times came. Thanks to the caution of the eldest, the estate survived. But the youngest could not get work. Eventually she ran out of money and was reduced to stealing slops intended for pigs. She reflected on her foolishness and decided to return home. She planned to say to her mother, ‘I have concerned myself with selfish and frivolous things, and am not fit to be your daughter; but hire me as a servant, and I will serve you and my older brother and sister, and make amends.’
But when the mother saw her daughter returning, she ran out and embraced her; and told the servants to bring out the best robe and put it on her, and to kill the fatted calf, and to prepare a feast.

When the older two came in from the field, they could not mistake the sound of Laughter. ‘Listen, mother!’ the eldest protested angrily. ‘I work like a slave, and you never give me anything so I might celebrate with my friends.’ The middle child was also outraged. ‘So many hungry children have not tasted meat, and you have squandered the calf on a fool.’

Then the mother said to her three children, ‘Beloved, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this family of ours was dead, and now we have a chance for new life. Without each other all of us were lost; but now together we have the chance to be found.’

Managerialism

Managerialism plays a huge part in our society. For example, it has been at the centre of painful change in the National Health Service for 30 years. As a head-hunter, I worked on the appointment of the first chief executive of the NHS. I also recruited a business person to be the first national chief executive of the prison service; and another to be its first qualified finance director. Justin Welby, our first business Archbishop of Canterbury, is trying to bring practices of leadership and management from business into the church.

I did a doctorate in management and help teach at Cass Business School, in the City. Around the world, business schools have accelerated the explosion of managerialism. Business and management is now the most studied undergraduate subject in the UK. At master’s level, business and management degrees outnumber their rivals by two or three to one.

Generosity

Since this taught managerialism is barely a century old, we don’t know whether Jesus would have studied for an MBA. But we can find the principles of both Managerialism and Generosity in his teaching.

Remember the master who requires proportionate investment returns from servants put in charge of different amounts of wealth; or the bridesmaids who fail to equip themselves with prudent reserves of oil.

But remember also the boy with five loaves and two fishes, or the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment: these are stories of generosity flying in the face of prudent calculation.

The rivalry between Managerialism and Generosity was on our front pages this summer with the collapse of the charity Kids’ Company. Managerialism can’t believe in the foolishness, or unprofessionalism, of not building up financial reserves. Generosity despairs of blindness, or heartlessness, in the face of desperate need. This tension isn’t the story of one charity: under the name of austerity, it’s a story which is cutting whole nations in two.

St Martin’s

St Martin’s has its own place in this story. In the early 1990s, after decades of thinking that only Generosity was Christian, we nearly became Kids’ Company ourselves.
Part of the solution was to create a business – a market in the courtyard and a restaurant downstairs. But the solution wasn’t creating something outside this sacred space: the solution involved wrenching change and disagreement where you are sitting, and in our hearts. Imagine the tension one Sunday morning when the member of the congregation leading our prayers asked God to forgive us for the price of our restaurant’s coffee.

The vicar who led us through those times was Geoffrey Brown, who died this summer. Geoffrey is remembered by words on the light well downstairs which refer to a cloak cut in two, which is also the basis of our logo. As Geoffrey grappled with how to teach us that Generosity on its own is lost, he returned time and again to the story of St Martin, whose day it is today. Martin, then a Roman soldier, meets a beggar by the side of the road, and has a vision of Christ. With his sword Martin cuts his tunic in two, keeping half and sharing half. He doesn’t share it all. That’s why our logo has cut, frayed edges.

In 2015 our journey has taken us to a place with frayed edges, in which Managerialism and Generosity acknowledge that they cannot do without each other. But it’s hard. It’s not just edges which are frayed, but our consciences and tempers. It feels a long way from heaven. Perhaps we’ve forgotten something.

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Martha Ellen Zenfell reads her own poem, The Tunnel at the End of the Light.

Waves smack, certain of success.  
Inside, I dress for future headlines,  
making up the past and primping the present.  
The inevitable will be presentable.

A deluge of scent engulfs me,  
along with waterfall folds of silk and patterned memory.  
I sink into the shoes – Jimmy Choos –  
that steer me to the door.

At the captain’s table is  
a rabbi,  
a lady of the night,  
Michel Foucault  
and Oscar Wilde, who might compose a few words later on.  
Something witty. A pity no one will be here  
To hear him.

Dessert is a flourish of berries and cream.  
‘Here’s to the fools,’ says Michel Foucault,  
and we smile in grim agreement.  
Champagne flutes are tipped,  
sipped,  
and then hang, halfway from lips  
in parched, private despair.

The band strikes up a song and a black man  
belts words to ‘What a Wonderful World’.  
The world tilts in time to the tune.

We dance and flirt  
drink and float
as if there were no tomorrow.

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**Laughter**

Theorists point out that there are different kinds of laughter. We can see that in the 23 times in which laughter occurs in the Bible. For example, there is the victor’s laugh of superiority, or there is the frivolity of emptiness, about which Ecclesiastes writes:

> For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools; this also is vanity (Ecclesiastes 7:6).

For me, Martha’s ship of fools rings with both of those laughers. This also describes the prodigal daughter, when she has run away.

But the principal theory of laughter is different, and matches the one occasion when God speaks directly about it in the Bible. This theory is, we laugh when we grasp that something is two very different things at once – such as the moment we grasp that Mr So-and-so is not only the self-important bank manager who holds our fate in his hands, but also 90 kilos of flesh descending at 9.8 metres per second squared as a result of stepping on a banana skin.

In Genesis 18, Sarah laughs when God promises that she and Abraham will have a son and bring into being a mighty nation. She laughs at the idea of being old, and the mother of a nation. God notices and asks Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh?’ (Genesis 18:13). At first Sarah denies it, out of fear. But in Genesis 21, after she has given birth to Isaac, Sarah exclaims:

> ‘God has brought laughter for me; and everyone who hears will laugh with me ... Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’ (Genesis 21: 6-7)

In Sarah’s initial evasion I hear an echo of the Garden of Eden. Maybe Sarah joins a line of women who are the first, before men, to see the significance of things which are two things at once: including Eve with the apple which confers knowledge of good and evil; and Mary Magdalene seeing the risen Lord, fully human and fully divine.

If so, then the pattern of laughter has to be at the heart of Christianity, because ours is a religion of incarnation: of a belief that to be human is to be inseparably two things at once: a child of God and a variable number of kilos of flesh.

The story I have offered is my attempt to wonder whether, in the divine scheme, the reconciliation of Managerialism and Generosity is not possible without reconciling with something frivolous and far off, but possibly indispensable to the Christian story: Laughter.

**Returning to heaven**

Laughter restores to us a sense of divinely ridiculous proportion, in which whether we choose to be Managerial or Generous, is both deeply serious and – through God’s inexhaustible grace – profoundly unimportant at the same time.

Managerialism, Generosity, Laughter: all good to eat, and necessary; but like the original apple, all containing a seed of death or idolatry.

A manager must set out to plan and to control. The idolatry of management is to think that everything must be controlled, preferably by the manager. That is one of the three temptations refused by Jesus.
The idolatry of generosity is to think one’s work is so vital to God’s scheme that prudence is unnecessary, because angels will come to save you. The trustees of Kids’ Company seem to have acted on that principle: and for some years, the angels did come. This temptation is also refused by Jesus.

The seed of death within laughter, which can lighten or leaven all things, may be the temptation to make everything palatable: to turn every stone into bread; to turn all life’s lemons into lemonade. That becomes the hollow jollity of Martha’s poem; a third temptation refused by Jesus. The Bible may be telling us, these are three most serious temptations any human can face. They can only be avoided by balance. What is the balance of managerialism, generosity and laughter in your life?

And so we finish back at heaven. I have offered some reasons to suppose that heaven is a place of laughter. It is not a space from which laughter as well as tears have disappeared because everything is spotless and simple; it is complex; it is funny. That seems to be the direction in which we are beckoned. Then the doctrine of the Trinity might simply mean, there is treasure to come, beyond even the complexity of being two things at the same time. I hope so.