

Who Are You? Living a Godly Life

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Introduction

I understand theology to be the answer to the question 'Who is God?' and ethics to be the response to the question 'Who are you?' Hence theological ethics is the reply to the question, 'Who are you in the light of who God is?' To be a Christian is constantly to be wrestling with the issue of 'Who am I in the light of the God whose life is shaped to be with us in Christ and who in the Holy Spirit makes Christ present to us now and always?' To be enfolded in that enquiry is to become holy.

I'm suspicious of the language of 'The Little Way' because the people I've known who wanted me to concentrate on their little ways turned out to have every reason to want me not to see what was going on in their other ways; but also because it plays into the idea that Christianity is fundamentally about the hidden and unseen, that God dwells in the shadows of my heart rather than in the world of tension and conflict; and most of all because valorises the categories of little and great in a way that Paul's kenotic hymn of Philippians 2 transforms and William Blake's lines about seeing the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower transcend.

I take the language of the Little Way as a desire to be holy couched in a recognition that the world isn't much interested in holiness. So 'little' doesn't so much mean 'small' as 'unregarded,' like Dorothea in George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, whose closing words are as follows.

(T)he effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

I want now to explore six answers to the question, 'Who am I in the light of who God is?' My hope is that those answers yield, if not a fully fledged ethic of holiness, then at least a structure within which such an ethic could emerge.

A Child of God

My first answer is, a child of God. Think about this in three dimensions. First, the wonder of being alive. We can call that creation. Second, the wonder of being conscious, in relationship, in society. We can call that culture. Third, the wonder of being in relationship with God, now and forever. We can call that Christ. Any of the three would overwhelm us if we allowed them to fill our imagination. But we dwell in all three. Wonder is too small a word; but there's none better. Let's take them in turn.

Creation means existence. It means beyond eternal Trinitarian essence, God chose for there to be something else. It's not just our own smallness in the midst of such enormity of galaxies that should engulf us – it's the very fact of existence. The most astonishing of all breathtaking facts is that there is existence – and I'm part of it. There are waves that crash relentlessly on the shore. There's the sun that gives light and warmth. There's blue sky that opens the window on limitless space. There's rain that softens and refreshes. There's wind that rearranges and invisibly presses. Ponder any one of these, or snow, hail, thunder or cloud, and you're lost in depth, texture, newness, replenishment, glory. Then add in earth – soil, vegetation, and scales of life – birds that swoop and chirrup, animals that burrow and canter, lizards and insects and micro-organisms. You quickly realise there's a whole drama of existence going on in which humans are ignorant observers or minor characters.

Culture means human existence. It means first of all consciousness, the awareness of being alive, of other people, of the world, of making sense of the world and of formulating plans and acting on them. It means how we interact with one another, how we make meaning, how we find beauty, build trust, discover truth, establish relationship, communicate feeling. It means how we get used to such things, like learning a language, and how we can pick up signals and feel excluded by missing indicators. It means diversity, and rules, and preferences, and tastes, and skills, talents, gifts. It means how we express ourselves, what we value, what we cherish, seek and avoid. It means how we use things, to cook, to build, to make, to dispose of, to wear. It means art; it means science, engineering, technology. It means the making of micro-existences that can become so absorbing we are

unaware of others, unaware of creation, unaware of anything outside a project, obsession, battle or goal. This can culture constitute a creation within creation.

Christ means the relationship between divine essence and human existence. There is existence; I am in existence; and yet, astonishingly, the essence that is beyond existence wishes to be in relationship with existence – and to be in relationship with me: to be my companion. The whole of essence is shaped to be in relationship with us, me; and existence – we, I – find no shape unless and until we find relationship with essence. Christ is the point where essence and existence meet. This is our encounter with story. Story is our attempt to make meaning out of disparate event, feelings and experiences – to draw correspondences and resonances between people, things and contexts. Story is the litany of how God encounters us; all story is a shadow, an impression, a ghost, sometimes a parody of the story of God and us. All relationship is an image, practice, preparation, sometimes travesty of God's relationship with us. We have a paradigm of how to meet Christ: be with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger. We have a pattern of how to conduct such a relationship: eat together, bear one another's burdens, wash feet.

To be a child of God is to dwell in these three relationships in a spirit of wonder. When Jesus says we are to receive the kingdom of God like a child he's inviting us to retain the balance of awe and simplicity in the face of the glory and complexity of what we are beholding. There is myriad intricacy, in creation, society, God; and yet there is a place for us in all three. There are plenty of occasions when we scratch our heads about the flaws in creation, the woes of society, the mysteries of God; and yet in the end, our bafflement is saturated by wonder, the quandary of the question 'Why?' overwhelmed by the quantity of the statement 'is.' We never chose to be alive, we never selected 'society' in a dropdown of possible options, we never identified God as a suitable source of causation, meaning and purpose: these things are all beyond gifts, in the land of grace. Let us wonder – before, and after, we do anything else. Thus is holiness.

The Offspring of My Parents

I am, second, the offspring of my parents. This isn't a statement about adoption or single-parent families. It isn't even a nod to those whose experience of being raised by parents was gruelling. It's a recognition that my existence depends not just in its inception but at every stage of life on the ministrations of others, present or at a distance. Conception and birth are where creation and humanity most obviously meet. But at many more such moments, human life is one not of independence but of a vast network of dependencies. To be constantly mindful of these dependencies is to live a life of gratitude.

Imagine getting on a train. Someone had to find a way to turn fuel and machine into forward movement. In the mists of time that fuel was laid down in the earth or seabed. To extract it is dangerous, demanding work. It then needs transporting. The pollution created in its extraction, transportation and use has to be offset somewhere, somehow, by somebody. Someone had to lay the track, devise, manufacture and install the signals, design and build the stations – all with their own raw materials, production, and transportation. Someone had to build the train, design and make its internal fittings, and anticipate how it will be used. Someone had to design and build the station, and locate it in the architectural and transport context of the city. More subtly, someone needed to construct a timetable, do market research on the frequency of service, and many people had to be eager to set foot on the train, busily to seek its destination, in order to make it economically viable. Someone then has to drive the train and take tickets and ensure safety. When any of these things go wrong – when the engine breaks down, the track or signalling develop a fault, the driver or guard go on strike or on the sick, the passenger numbers change due to a pandemic – the fragility and interdependence of the whole system is laid bare.

To be the offspring of my parents means to appreciate the fragility and interdependence of almost every feature of life. When a household says grace before a meal, it is recognising the web of labour and love that has made the meal possible. Crop growers and animal farmers near and far, food processors and abattoirs, package manufacturers, supermarket distributors and sales staff, family grocery shoppers and supper cooks, let alone those who made the table, linen, bowls, stove, pans, recipe books, dishwasher, soap, towels, closets, and so much besides. Life isn't just for living – it's for realising how many people it takes to make it possible for you to live. And that's before considering the complexity of forming and restoring relationships that enable a household to sit at table together – after harsh words, painful apologies, learning to live with difference, adjusted expectations, mutual forbearance, swallowed pride. The person that says 'I just showed up and enjoyed it' is simply displaying their ignorant disregard of the conditions that undergird their life.

The truth is, some of these are unjust conditions. Understanding conditions isn't just about comprehending contingency, recognising limitation and appreciating chance. It's also about appreciating the degree to which the smooth gliding of the duck on the pond depends on the fervid paddling of the flippers beneath, and the way this image corresponds to the relationship of those advantaged and those disadvantaged by the subtleties of culture and economy and the flagrancys of injustice and oppression.

A tea worker in the central hills of Sri Lanka will typically live in a 250 square foot family unit. She wakes at 4.30 to report to work at 7.30 a.m. She is so busy preparing breakfast for her children, getting them ready for school and attending her sick mother that she has no time for her own morning meal. She plucks tea leaves from 8 until 4. Supervisors shout at her if she takes a moment's break during work hours. Management demands that each worker reach their harvest target of 42 pounds of tea leaves per day, whether or not there are enough tea leaves to pick. She picks up her younger children from childcare at 12.15. After attending to her children and eating lunch she hurries back to work. On the way home at 5p.m. she collects firewood for cooking. Finally she can sit down with her children and have a shared meal. She goes to sleep at about 9 p.m. to start the same routine the following day. There are three water taps for the 50 families on the division. The taps operate for 90 minutes each day. She has to queue to collect water for her family, and in the dry season she must go to a nearby village in search of water. Two or three families are forced to share a single toilet, which has no water supply. Essential medicines are not available. Education opportunities for Tamil-speaking plantation children are extremely poor. Most children have to abandon their education by grade 6 or 7. Wages are very low, especially for Tamils. Yet the plantations themselves are hugely profitable, and record profits of up to \$1m a year.¹

These are the fervid paddlings of the flippers that make for the smooth gliding of the Western duck. These are the conditions that undergird each morning sip of Ceylon tea. The point is not overnight to change them; it's every day to be aware of them.

A Disciple in the Church

Baptism is a change of identity and belonging. You are no longer your own. You are no longer an individual, but a member of the body of Christ. Thus church is not an agency you hire to improve your spirituality or educate your Christian imagination or express your desire to worship or help raise your children; it's the body of which you're a part. Church offers the opportunity to give and to receive.

Humility means receiving what is being given in plenty rather than, like a consumer, selecting from a stack of products what to receive. A church may or may not have inspiring music; but it will always have people who just show up and whose company makes you keep commitments you might otherwise let slip. A church may or may not have fine architecture; but it will always have human beings who are fearfully and wonderfully made. A church may or may not have electric preaching; but it will always have opportunities to discern God's word in scripture in the company of others. A church may or may not have healthy forms of direct contact between congregation members and those experiencing acute disadvantage, but it will always have moments when the membrane of human vulnerability is pierced, and true companionship can be discovered and displayed.

Just as being the offspring of my parents discloses the network of crucial contributions made by a myriad of worker bees to make my life possible, just so being a disciple in the church reveals the cloud of witnesses that's needed to constitute the body of Christ. The saints and martyrs that have trodden this way before have laid down traditions and embodied the wisdom of what it means to be God's companions; the communion of those across the world who today confess the lordship of Christ offer the solidarity of those who are both strangers and siblings; the glorious company of those whose number we can't count, who will become members of this body in centuries to come and will be met in the glory of God's eternal future represent the hope of what God will do. Every contemporary disciple rests on the shoulders of all three dimensions of church: heritage, breadth and destiny. These are ways of receiving the ministry of Christ and the mission of the Holy Spirit. More precisely, while the radical walk barefoot and make prophetic gestures and have ecstatic experiences and put their bodies between warring parties, someone somewhere audits accounts and cleans toilets and counts votes and corrects minutes of meetings. Every Christian is like the motorcyclist at the top of a pyramid, resting on the shoulders all the way down to those driving the bikes.

¹ Jayanthi Pererac, 'A day in the life of a Sri Lankan tea worker,' *World Socialist Website* December 9, 2005, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2005/12/sril-d09.html> Accessed June 17, 2022.

But there's a role for giving humbly as well as receiving humbly. The dream of ministry is of the perfect interface of giving and receiving, where the joy of your heart coincides with an ability to stir others to mission, empower others in service and enliven others in faith. That's the moment when the joy of your heart meets the need of the community and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This needn't be just the preserve of the choral soloist or the mesmeric preacher. It may well be the experience of the organiser of the church retreat weekend or the director of the children's Christmas pageant. It could be the gift of the administrator of the disability and theology conference or the delight of the convenor of the ushers' guild. But that's not the only kind of giving. Giving can mean contributing to the needs of the community even when those needs don't match your skills or interests. Someone needs to stand at the door and distribute the leaflets or maracas needed to participate in worship. Someone has to get busy in the kitchen preparing food for the community dinner. Someone must sit and listen to Marion, even though Marion always seems to say the same thing and ask for more attention and more understanding and more sympathy than the whole community combined can give. As George Herbert inimitably puts it, 'A man that looks on glass, On it may stay his eye; Or if he pleaseth, through it pass, And then the heav'n espy.' Perhaps most of all, someone must make the gift of receiving – must take in all these talented people expressing themselves, these dutiful people offering themselves, these restless people finding the faithfulness to keep showing up, these impoverished people making a tithe and these gentle people trying to listen to one another – and express appreciation, recognition, and gratitude. Over and over again.

Church doesn't always feel like sanctification. It's sometimes said that if you can survive church, you'll find purgatory no problem. But church is the fundamental recognition of two basic convictions: that we can't do it alone, and that Christ has already done it for us. It's thus the perpetual challenge of cooperating with one another in the power of the Holy Spirit; which is invariably more important than the details of what is actually done. Sanctity is a collective quality more than an individual one. Such is holiness.

An Adult in the World

The priesthood of all believers is a widely misunderstood term. It's generally thought, particularly among evangelicals, to indicate that the notion of an ordained and thus set-apart priesthood is a medieval excrescence, and that any person may, for example, preside at a service of the Lord's Supper. Those of such views are customarily reproved by others who insist 'all believers' is a collective notion, and thus that when all believers are gathered in God's name, they are together a royal priesthood. But I like to think of the phrase in a third sense. And that is that being a disciple in the world, being an apostle in mission, fundamentally means being a priest. A priest in such a sense is one that brings the urges and energies and fruits of creation to their true goal in the glory, worship and enjoyment of God. At the same time it means one who brings the full wonder of the Holy Spirit to bear on the grand or minute context of life as it unfolds. In short a priest brings creation and all people to God and God to all people and creation.

One theologian puts it more succinctly. Our commission is to be a reconciling presence in the life of our neighbour. Being an adult in the world thus refers to the relationships and roles, the tasks and initiatives one takes up or finds oneself in not because of the intention of ministry or the impulse of mission but simply by dint of being a human being in society – a neighbour, colleague, citizen, parent, friend. This seems a world away from the connotations of holiness – but it provides the bedrock on which a life of holiness can be built.

A good place to start is, Do no harm. It's by no means an end point, but it avoids the very common kind of equation by which a person appeals to all the good things, they've done, the right attitudes they hold, and the appropriate networks to which they belong – and then says, surely given all this on the credit side, you can overlook a few human failings? Do no harm says, simply, do not cheat on your expenses or tax return or CV; when you are in the wrong, acknowledge, confess, stop digging the hole deeper and poisoning the currency of integrity and truth: apologise, make amends, learn, do better next time, anticipate when you're going to get into a situation like the one that got you into trouble last time, don't naively or disingenuously suppose you're the constant victim of accidental circumstances that could never recur.

Do no harm is an apt beginning when identifying a way of making a living. Some paths of life may be true vocations, where you readily understand how your work is either embodying church or announcing and advancing God's coming kingdom. But others are tent making and carpentry. It would be hard to fulfil the requirement to do no harm if the *raison d'être* of your work was to defraud or mislead or seduce. But to be an adult in the workplace, to be a person trusted and respected, to seek the well-being of all and the flourishing of

the enterprise, to put your own needs to one side and uphold the vulnerable – this can be done in almost any profession.

Do no harm does not mean avoid conflict. The person determined to avoid conflict simply creates unresolved situations for everyone around them. How many family road trips involve a conversation like this? ‘Why are we spending three days in the car, mom?’ ‘Because there’s a conversation your father needs to have with his sister, and we’re all being dragged in as proxies to a silent standoff that’s been going on since they were children.’ Being an adult in the world means finding ways to navigate the most exasperating relationships if only limit their fallout on others.

Acting well is something you can learn how to do; and get better at. You can learn tact. Instead of writing an email that says, ‘I thought your proposal was trite and superficial,’ you can learn how to say, ‘Thanks so much for sharing an early draft with me. I really appreciate the care you’ve taken over it and the ground you’ve managed to cover. I particularly liked several of your insights and forms of speech. I did wonder if it might be possible to give yourself permission to explore just a few of your themes in more depth’ and so on. You can learn how to invite honesty without making instant judgements. Instead of saying, ‘You don’t look like the kind of person who spends much time on your appearance,’ you can say, ‘Tell me about who in the family you were most eager to please, whose judgement felt the most significant, and how you developed the resilience to dress the way you wanted.’ You can learn racial and gender awareness. Instead of saying ‘I’ve noticed all the people who’ve contributed so far are white males,’ you can investigate what hidden barriers there are to participation and what unstated forms of permission are part of the unspoken contract in the room.

You can learn how to use power well. You can spend serious time coming to understand your suppressed needs and desires, and realising how readily a person can transpose such forces into their roles in overseeing and giving opportunities to others. You can realise how much scope you have for making other peoples’ lives better, by introducing them to mentors or networks, taking seriously their ideas and doubts, keeping their secrets and respecting their difference from you. You can be an example, not by virtue-signalling your generosity or displaying your achievements, but by defusing tension or publicly admitting your mistakes. You can keep your promises, refrain from lying, acknowledge your shortcomings, encourage the disheartened, spend time with the neglected, listen to the unheard, inform yourself about the complex, withhold hasty opinions, suppress your own anxieties when articulating them would be depleting for those around you.

Such things are seldom exciting, rarely rewarded, hard won, never settled. But they provide the foundations of trust on which all true adventure is established. By being an adult in the world you are striving to ensure that you don’t leave a mess for others to clear up, that you don’t create a greater problem by closing your eyes and hoping it will go away, you don’t damage another by using them for your pleasure rather than enjoying them to further their flourishing. There’s a straight line from being the offspring of your parents to being an adult in the world: it goes from realising how much of your life you owe to others, to seeking not to create problems for others through your own negligence, selfishness, laziness, lust, impatience or greed. An adult trusts that through the Holy Spirit there is enough for everybody, and thus there’s no need for me to take more than enough for myself. To do so indicates fear, which an adult learns to hold in check, and distrust, which an adult learns to hold in moderation.

Plenty of people who’ve felt a call to holiness have omitted this step. That’s a big reason why some of the most vaunted spiritual and theological guides have turned out to have profoundly flawed personal relationships. Being holy and being an adult aren’t alternatives. The six dimensions I’m outlining here of what it means to live a holy life are all indispensable. To make pancakes you need flour, milk, butter, baking soda, eggs and sugar. If you miss one out, you haven’t got a pancake. You can miss out other things like vanilla and salt – but you can’t miss out any of the six core ingredients. Holiness is the same.

A Midwife of the Kingdom

Church and kingdom sometimes overlap, mercifully, but are not the same. The former refers to the way the Holy Spirit makes those who are eager to participate in its work into the form of Christ, in spite of and notwithstanding the fragile, fitful and clumsy clay jars they often prove to be. The kingdom refers to the way the Holy Spirit offers glimpses of heaven through the unwitting yet not necessarily unwilling agency of those who profess no desire to resemble the crucified Christ or live the life of his resurrection, and how the Holy Spirit raises up creation to circumvent human shortcomings.

The story of the finding of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter introduces the motif of midwives: those who assist in the Holy Spirit's action of bringing grace to birth but do not cause it and cannot take much credit for it. Being a midwife of the kingdom means longing for such birth to take place, advancing it in every way, recognising the delicacy of timing when things can't be rushed or delayed, and being present to facilitate and celebrate when it comes about, painful as it may also be.

Let's say the example is refugees crossing the English Channel in small boats, exploited by people smugglers, rejected by the government, resented by much of the population, at terrible risk from the waves. The theological issues are that the church is taught that Christ comes in the form of the hungry and the stranger, and that entertaining angels unawares is how grace is encountered. So to be a midwife of the kingdom is first to ensure that churches are actually receiving the gifts God is sending by welcoming refugees through resettlement schemes, drop-in centres for fellowship and relationship-building, language-teaching programmes and skills training where appropriate. There's no use calling on others for justice if you're not yourself practising the ways of the kingdom in the life of the church. Then, second, to be a midwife is to embody the conviction that the refugees themselves are a gift to church and society, and to create or enhance channels by which their voices can be heard and enrich not only understanding of why people seek asylum this way but of many other things the abundance of their rich heritage can offer to local scarcity. Then third, having practised the ways of welcome and experienced the gifts of the stranger, midwives can offer alternatives to government and find ways for decision-makers to take those alternatives seriously. Finally fourth, being a midwife of the kingdom is to maintain focus on the issues and the people involved, if the birth of righteousness is slow in coming to abide faithfully until it does, or if the transformation does come to give thanks and celebrate and ensure the beneficiaries not be left alone but may bring all their gifts to enhance the life of church and society.

Holiness does not mean putting your head down and battling furiously, with no trust in colleagues or confidence in authorities, but determined to burst the gates of oppression with one almighty charge. The reason why many have found community organising a helpful introduction to being a midwife of the kingdom is that inculcates the practices of solidarity, teamwork, respecting one another's roles, planning, and the arts of the weak. In other words, in advancing kingdom, it gives people a richer understanding and more tangible experience of church. Justice has at least as much room for the cool and methodical head as for the impassioned and impatient heart.

Let's return to the example of the tea workers cited earlier. The answer is not to get on a plane to Sri Lanka, berate the plantation owners, picket the government, boycott the tea, invest in swathes of land and set up a cooperative plantation in competition with the existing suppliers. Such action would further disempower the very workers whose plight originally ignited your fury. The answer has to begin with the tea workers themselves – not alone, but in collaboration with activists, politicians, aid agencies, overseas governments, overseas markets, and eventually the plantation owners themselves being persuaded to move to a system that respected the dignity of their workers in pay, conditions and representation, and marketed the tea as an example of fair and dignified production, rather than hiding the layers of oppression that kept output high and conditions so poor. Somewhere along the line of building this coalition and beginning to see some significant change, the kingdom begins to break in. The Holy Spirit is alive in the transformation of the imagination, in the concentration of will, and in the serendipitous moments that seem too wondrous to have happened by chance.

For some, these kingdom endeavours have come to offer an authenticity that they cannot find in church. This isn't a reason to lament. A church that never issues in kingdom is sadder than a kingdom that never traces back to church. The two are impoverished without one another. Church that never issues in kingdom can become self-absorbed, stuffy, complacent, and impervious to the realities of social relations that dominate and constrain the lives of most people. Kingdom that never traces back to church can be self-righteous, can reinvent the wheel, can be ungracious and ungrateful, can become suffused with its own self-importance and unmoored from any true definition of what justice is. Kingdom says, let's build a house where love can dwell. Church says, a house that's not founded on God will not stand.

A Signpost of Heaven

Holiness finally refers to the way others can see 'not I but the grace of God that is in me.' It means to live a life that makes no sense if the God of Jesus Christ is a figment of the imagination. It is better to fail in a cause that

will finally succeed than to succeed in a cause that will finally fail. To be a signpost of heaven most often means failing in a cause that will finally succeed.

Imagine a community that had put decades of care into how best to relate to people experiencing homelessness – that had adapted over that time from supporting ‘gentlemen of the road’ to responding to teenagers fleeing domestic violence to recognising the role of drugs to absorbing increasing numbers of overseas nationals. Imagine that community wrestling with how to come to terms with those who die homeless – both those known to the agencies, who yet insist on sleeping outside, and those who remain anonymous, and are found one morning having died on the street. Imagine that in a major capital city those people number around 170 a year. If you were to convene a group of activists, from charities, churches, and including those themselves experiencing homelessness, and were to plan a liturgy where all those names were read out, where testimonies were offered about four of them, each from a person who knew them, where a leader of the community spoke words of honesty and truth, where a collective action was performed that honoured and cherished, where each attendee took away a card with a name of one of the dead to commemorate in the ensuing year, and where a chorus (or two) of displaced people sang their heart out of dignity and resilience and hope – would that not be a signpost of heaven?

Imagine a community that was working to receive and integrate immigrants from Afghanistan, Hong Kong, and Ukraine, and find hope and belonging for asylum seekers from several dozen countries. Imagine it held an event on World Refugee Day that involved interviews with those who’d had arduous journeys, who’d made bright new beginnings, and who’d found hosting strangers to be entertaining angels unawares. Imagine there was an address from a person whose parent and grandparents had respectively been refugees and who’d grown to become a figure in public life in a country that had welcomed her family. Imagine if songs at such an event were sung by Ukrainians who’d only arrived in the country days ago but had pre-invasion been set for prominent musical careers in their home country. Imagine looking out on a sea of faces of every kind of diversity, a kaleidoscope of hope and experience, like Peter’s sheet of all kinds of animals. Would that not be a signpost of heaven? Surrounded by all the people you’ll meet there?

On a more personal level being a signpost of heaven means immersing yourself in the essence of God even while saturated with the complexities of present existence. This means the daily practice of sitting in silence allowing God to fill you with the breath and imagination of heaven, however much you are pressed in on all sides by the demands and urgencies of the needy and demanding around you. It means editing out of your vocabulary all phrases that are operationally atheistic – like ‘life isn’t a rehearsal’ or ‘bucket list.’ It means spending time with people like those who are profoundly mentally disabled, who seem to offer no earthly or tangible reward. It means working and advocating for the well-being of the planet not because if we don’t our children are toast, but because if we don’t cherish the gift we’ve been given in this life we can’t expect God to give us a renewed one in the next. It means being with God, ourselves, one another and the creation in ways that anticipate how we will be with each forever.

Being a signpost of heaven is vital to holiness not only because it recognises that everything we do in this life is limited, partial and incomplete, but also because it realises that our purpose in this life is to make gestures and offer words and develop practices that anticipate heaven. Our lives are like green shoots whose purpose is eventually to bring forth flowers, a destiny that awaits fulfilment beyond temporal existence; yet those green shoots are valid precisely because of what they will become in God’s kingdom. A short shoot is not inherently of less value than a tall one; neither has a flower, but both ultimately will. To be a signpost of heaven is to value things for what they will become in God’s kingdom, not for the degree of fulfilment they have shown short of God’s kingdom.

Martyrdom is an ultimate form of being a signpost of the kingdom. It isn’t everyone’s calling. But neither should anyone rule it out. It must always be a possible calling for every disciple.

To be a signpost of heaven is to say, ‘He must increase, but I must decrease.’ It’s to allow the Holy Spirit to shrink your personal agenda so small and to grow the kingdom agenda in you so great that what you think comes naturally is God’s nature at work in you. Your joy is God’s joy. You’ve learned not to covet the things in short supply but instead to cherish the things that never run out and last forever.

Conclusion

I’d like to highlight the things in this talk that might not be immediately obvious, especially those things one might expect to find in a talk about holiness.

We have multiple identities. I believe we're all called to inhabit all six of these. Some come more easily; others have to be cultivated. All are required to aspire to the wholeness in holiness. All are better inhabited inadequately than not at all.

To inhabit all six means you don't have to choose between love and justice, between ministry to the church and mission to the world, between love for one and love for all, between worship and service. Thus, work for social justice is faithful when it belongs as part of being a midwife of the kingdom, but it can become problematic if it demands to edge out the other five identities. Likewise following a little way of holiness is appropriate when it is a way of being a child of God and a disciple in the church, especially when commitments and disappointments mean your light seems unavoidably hidden under a bushel for a season; but it doesn't absolve you of being an adult in the world, even if that means facing uncomfortable tensions that perpetuate unworthy infantilisations.

Finally no one is exemplary in all six identities. When a much-admired person turns out to have seriously failed, their qualities in several areas don't excuse that failure – usually failure to be an adult in the world; but can nonetheless demonstrate that all that was good in them might not be lost; and awareness of the six identities might make it easier to condemn what needs to be condemned while continuing to find blessing in what is still a blessing. Likewise almost no one is disastrous in all six identities; thus some grace can be found in almost every life.

Holiness is not success in a course of self-improvement: it's a growing permission to let your life be saturated by the Spirit and allow your habits to be shaped by grace. These six identities offer different windows onto the Spirit's work. The Spirit will work in your life, whether you like it or not: the secret is to learn to enjoy it.