

It's a puzzlement! 19-02-2023

I am told, by people who are experts in communication that a good element of an effective talk is to make it clear right from the beginning, what it is that you want to communicate. This is commonly referred to as your take aways. In other words, what it is that you want people to take away with them at the end of your talk. Maybe preachers should do the same. So in the interests of good communication I'm going to offer you upfront a set of take aways.

At the end of this sermon, I want you to take away the following twelve takeaways.:

1. Life is full of mysteries;
2. Life is a mystery;
3. Mysteries are challenges;
4. We are the only living entity (as far as we know) that is able to ask questions, so we ought to make the most of it;
5. We need answers, even when they are not complete;
6. We ought to ask questions;
7. When we live life without mystery, we feel incomplete;
8. Some parts of our lives seem unfinished when they are devoid of mystery;
9. That is particularly the case with Church;
10. A church, without mystery, is hardly a church at all;
11. The Transfiguration is one of these mysteries and the church has taken it very seriously for a very long time indeed;
12. So should we!

Do you remember the movie, *The King and I*? Do you remember Yul Brynner saying in frustration "It's a puzzlement". He might have said "It's a....

- [bafflement](#)
- [bamboozlement](#)
- [befuddlement](#)
- [bemusement](#)
- [bewilderedness](#)
- [bewilderment](#)
- [confusedness](#)
- [confusion](#)
- [discombobulation](#)
- [distraction](#)
- [fog](#)
- [head-scratching](#)
- [muddle](#)
- [mystification](#)
- [perplexity](#)
- [tangle](#)

What a wonderful basket-full of synonyms for that frustration we all feel when we just don't understand.

It is, perhaps, significant that there's are so many synonyms. It bears witness to the ubiquity (the ever-presence) of mystery. We live with mystery daily. What, we might ask, are its antonyms: words that are, in meaning, the opposite of mystery. We might offer up "certainty" or "knowledge".

Th Quakers are fond of an old English word: "convincement". It sounds like certainty, but it isn't tat at all. It is a state of certainty in the face of mystery. How do I become a Quaker and live the Quaker life? Well, by convincement!

Often "mystery" is offered up as a conversation-stopper. What is the meaning of life? Well, it's a mystery; it's a puzzlement; it is just something that can't be explained! End of discussion!

I had a conversation with Margaret just yesterday about the Transfiguration. She told me that she had preached on this text and that she had (or has) a favourite example. It is a true story of a rock climber whose arm got stuck in a crevice and it looked like he was going to die there. Then he had a vision of his little boy running free, and he decided that there was something he must do — so he took out his knife and cut his arm off. The story has a happy ending. He joined his son again.

This was a story of a mystery that worked out for the best.

We live with mystery. It is a feature of our everyday life. The French have a word for everyday life: "le quotidien" or, in its anglicized form, "the quotidian". We each live in our own version of quotidian. We construct it, have it constructed for us - and we are constructed by it. The French sociologist, *Pierre Bourdieu* used the term "*Habitus*" to describe this social phenomenon. Here is one of my poems addressing the subject.

I am going to give you another example. This is an example of a Habitus, of a version of everyday life, in which has had the mystery drained from it. I imagined it, way back in 2017. It is the product of my imagination, but it is based on a real example — or many real examples. It is, as they say in the movies, based on a true story. It's a bit depressing. I might add "don't let this happen to you!"

Habitus

© Karel Reus, April 2022

Revised from a poem titled: *He did the same last week*, (August 2017)

He makes his way between the pews,
hymn and prayer books in one hand,
pew sheet in the other;
 (his day pack, as it were, for this recurrent short trip to who knows what).
In passing by he nods to some;
an eyebrow raised,
a formal smile,
hand raised,
no words,
admirable manners and civility,
shorthand body talk,
without closeness.
This is a place where habit reigns.

He did the same last week and the weeks before.

Like others in this sacred space, he knows his place.
He finds his seat, unmarked but understood to be his spot
by all but strangers (mercifully few),
It's been that way since Adam was a lad - or so it seems.

It was his last week and the weeks before,

The organist plays softly;
the tune, familiar, though not rousing, sets a mood.
He checks the hymn list,
grateful that among them are a few he knows,
but irritated that there's one he's never heard or sung.
The matter gets but passing thought.
It's been a while since he sang out loud - anyway.
The minister will no doubt tell his flock
that it is good to try new things.

He did that last week and the weeks before.

A reflex causes him to glance
at the empty spot beside him.
She, of blessed memory, sat there every week,
but now she's gone to God, or so they say.
He has trouble grasping that,
or picturing the look of her at all.
How strange that all those years have left so little trace.

He missed her last week and the weeks before.

His fragment reverie is shattered by the organ's chord
and in comes "Rev" in fancy dress
(where did that ir-Rev-erend thought come from?).
And so the show begins
with the pastor stepping up to that higher place
and telling of the mighty works of God,
and grace, and love, and peace,

as he did last week and the weeks before.

He tries to follow,
but his truant mind diverts and taunts him,
taking him down twisting paths.
He tries, O God he tries, but fails.
The pastor, nice bloke though he is, cannot connect.
The sermon ends but he cannot bring to mind the point of it,
assuming that it had one.
Was it about sin and forgiveness?
Those ideas he still can't grasp,

despite the memories of hurts he caused ...and injuries.
He tries to pray, but fails. He tries again.

It was the same last week and the weeks before.

The final prayers and hymns march on, and then it ends.
His back is sore. He never mentions it,
but pain is what he pays
for this strange hour in the house of God.
Were he to bother, he might see his pain as penance,
but he won't, because it's not his word,

nor was it last week or the weeks before.

He shuffles from the pew,
and in the aisle a woman asks about his health
and a bloke shakes hands and says g'day
and someone comments on the weather
and invites him to stay for a cuppa and a cake.

It was the same last week and the weeks before.

In time he gets back home,
seeks out his favourite chair,
registers the emptiness and
remote control in hand
he falls asleep.

He did the same last week and the weeks before.

The Habitus encompasses certainty and mystery, but the habitus of our church-going elderly man has lost its mystery-content. We live as if it is the certainties that count, but the mysteries also play (or also ought to play) a great part in our everyday lives from time to the time. Here are a few mysteries we might visit from time to time:

- What is the meaning of life?
- Is my existence meaningful?
- What was the origin of life?
- What causes that amazing moment when a child becomes self-conscious?
- What is love?
- Why do we hate?
- Why does forgiveness work?
- Is my life determined.
- Is there a God, and what is he/she like?
- Can I really and truly understand what it is like to be the person sitting next to me.

Most, if not all, of these everyday mysteries will never be explained to our satisfaction nor to the satisfaction of those around us. Not that we shouldn't ask the questions. Not that we shouldn't try to

explain the inexplicable. That is another great mystery. How come that we, of all the creation of which we are aware, are the ones that can ask such questions?

We can surely recognise that we are the part of creation that asks questions. That is our thing — our *raison d'être*. The fact that we don't get clear and definitive answers should not worry us. We are not complete unless we are posing questions — and the harder the questions the better!

Our faith, and its material manifestation; our Church, is part of our habitus - is part of our question-asking environment. In fact, we get rather irritated when our church puts the big questions aside. So we want the church to ask us to think about such imponderable mysteries like:

- What is God like?
- How do we explain creation and our part in the church?
- Did Jesus rise from the dead?
- Will we rise from the dead?
- Will Jesus come again?
- Can sin be forgiven?
- What is sin, anyway?
- Who am I?
- What am I?

This week the church asks us to think about a very strange event -- Jesus with two of his disciples on a mountaintop. Jesus looking wonderful - all brightness and light - and Elijah and Moses there too - and a cloud and God's voice.

Listen to the story again and try to enter into the mystery.

1Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

What does it all mean? A lot of books have been written in search of an answer - and a lot of sermons preached. Many "experts" tell us that this event is showing Jesus in his true colours. This is the Jesus of the heights as distinct from Jesus of the plain. Here is Jesus as the Godly Man, as distinct from Jesus as the Manly God. We need both, we are told. We, in the guise of disciples, try to make sense of it all and try to capture the divine in buildings and institutions. We had better hold our tongues about such

things. The disciples want to confine Jesus in their own quotidian - in the strictures of time and place. But Jesus understands that there is more to life than that, that we that we live lives of practicality. Yes, indeed we do. But we also we lives of mystery -- of questions that may never be answered. We live in a field of things -- of practicalities, but we live also in a field of meanings.

We follow Jesus from the plain to the mountain today. Glory be! The Transfiguration is about breaking free and living more abundantly.

So, to end, let's go back to our takeaways. Check if any of them took hold. Maybe some need to be revisited.

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12. So should we!

Experts in communication would tell me that twelve points is too many. No more than five, they would say. Oh well, maybe that proves I'm not a crash-hot communicator. But maybe you can make your own shortlist.

May it be so