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Towards a Prophetic Church of England

Sam Wells

We're here today because John Hull was a prophet. And if we ask ourselves the question, 'What Would a Prophetic Church of England Look Like?' the answer is simple: it would more like John Hull. But, while sufficient to answer the question, that would make a rather short lecture. So in honour of and thanks to John Hull, and in pursuit of a longer if less eloquent answer, I'm going to speak of four things: the gospel, the past, the future and the present.

The Gospel

The present tense doesn't exist. I don't mean that I'm not speaking to you now, that we're not really here, that All Saints Kings Heath and the Queens Foundation are all a great hoax, a multi-layered illusion. I mean that as soon as you try to put your finger on the present tense – bang – like a horsefly under a slapping hand, it's gone. Think of yourself as a child looking out of a train window trying to fix your eyes on a tree or field or hill outside. You can't. Think of yourself at a birthday party or in the midst of theatre or sport or music and wanting to freeze and capture the moment and never let it go. You can't. There's no such thing as the present tense. It's a construction designed to make us feel alive.

The moment we realise this we become subject to two primal, visceral, and existential terrors. The first terror is this: you can't stop time. It's out of control. It's like Canute trying to stop the incoming tide. It's an ever-rolling stream, and it's going to roll you and me away just as it's rolled away all its sons and daughters beforehand. When Muhammad Ali says 'I am the greatest of all time' or a World War One memorial says 'Their names shall live for evermore,' the pathos is comical or unbearable: have these people no notion of eternity? Look at the stars, search the wide blue yonder, imagine the vast expanse of relentless time. We're each as permanent as a feather on the wind. When four planes were hijacked on 9/11 and the passengers were hurtling toward their deaths, much energy was spent imagining the pathos and terror of their situations and in some cases depicting them as heroes in the face of an indescribable enemy. But the truth is, we're all on those planes. We're all hurtling through time towards certain death. If we set our lifespan against eternity, there's nothing inherently more substantial about 90 years of life than 50, or 30, or even 10. Time will gobble up us all. That's the first terror.

The second terror is this: what we've done can't be undone. However much we try to retell the story, airbrush the photographs, fiddle with the timings on the emails, deny, pretend, fabricate, or wriggle, there's no changing what's happened. Our histories are made up of folly, failure, and fecklessness; of deception, denial, and destruction. And we can't alter them. Of course it's not just what we've done; it's also a mixture of what's been done to us and what just happened and turned out in ways we found it hard to deal with. Disentangling these three threads – what we did, what was done to us, and what just happened and we didn't find a good way to deal with – is a long and challenging process, and most of the time we stuff it all in the spare room like a host rapidly tidying the house before company comes for dinner. But for most of us the spare room is full to bursting, and the energy it takes to live our lives without the vital things that are buried in the spare room and in fear of the living, smelly, costly, and maybe dangerous things that we suspect are lurking in the spare room means we only live a half-life, we only function with one hand, because the other hand is taken up trying to keep the door to the spare room firmly shut. Yet deep down we know that door will finally open, whether from the outside by someone discovering it or from the inside because the organic material within will eventually outgrow the space available. And that knowledge, that the past is an ogre that will finally crash down upon us – that's the second terror.

And these two terrors – the panic about the past and the fear of the future – constitute the prison of human existence. There's no such thing as the present tense because it's no more than the overlap between the past and the future. And there's no genuine living in the present tense because our lives are dominated by regret and bitterness and grief and humiliation about the past; and paralysed by fear and anxiety and terror and horror about the future. The present is tense, but it isn't truly present.

Think about your life. Think about what grieves you. I'm guessing it's two kinds of things. It's what's happened in the past that you can't change, the sequence of events that's led to a kind of prison, has led to you being in some sense in chains. We call that sin. And it's the things you cherish that you dread you can't keep – your youth, your life, the things and the people you love, this very moment we share right now. We call that death. And there's two ways you can spend your time. You can work hard to ensure every waking moment is a distraction from those two central concerns. Or you can dig deep into the heart of reality and name your fears and regrets and search for something or someone that is genuinely able to be present to you, genuinely to be with you, not in a way that denies past and future, but precisely in a way that offers, heals, redeems, and transforms past and future.

What is it that the Christian faith proclaims? Two central convictions. One about sin, and one about death. One about the past, and one about the future.

The first is about the past. It's the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness doesn't change the past. But it releases us from the power of the past. Forgiveness doesn't rewrite history. But it prevents our histories asphyxiating us. Fundamentally forgiveness transforms our past from an enemy to a friend, from a horror-show of shame to a storehouse of wisdom. In the absence of forgiveness we're isolated from our past, pitifully trying to bury or deny or forget or destroy the many things that haunt and overshadow and plague and torment us. Forgiveness doesn't change these things: but it does change their relationship to us. No longer do they imprison us or pursue us or surround us or stalk us. Now they accompany us, deepen us, teach us, train us. No longer do we hate them or curse them or resent them or begrudge them. Now we find acceptance, understanding, enrichment, even gratitude for them. That's the work of forgiveness. It's about the transformation of the prison of the past.

This isn't about willpower or determination or self-help. This is the work of Jesus. Jesus walks beside us, and the negative aspects of those past experiences he takes into his body, leaving us with the memories that can strengthen, deepen, and ennoble us. Jesus takes upon himself the evil that we've done and that's been done to us, facing the unimaginable agony of it all, and thereby literally gives us back our past as a gift and not a threat. Our chains fall off, our heart is free. Nothing, in the end, is wasted. All is redeemed.

And here's the second Christian conviction. It's about the future. The life everlasting. Everlasting life doesn't take away the unknown element of the future: but it takes away the paroxysm of fear that engulfs the cloud of unknowing. Everlasting life doesn't dismantle the reality of death, the crucible of suffering, the agony of bereavement: but it offers life beyond death, comfort beyond suffering, companionship beyond separation. In the absence of everlasting life we're terrified of our future, perpetually trying to secure permanence in the face of transitoriness, meaning in the face of waste, distraction in the face of despair. Everlasting life doesn't undermine human endeavour, but it rids it of the last word; evil is real, but it won't have the final say; death is coming, but it doesn't obliterate the power of God; identity is fragile, but that in us that resides in God will be changed into glory.

This isn't about fantasy. I haven't simply 'passed into the next room.' This is the work of Jesus. By rising from the dead Jesus turns death from a wall into a gate, from an obliteration to a threshold, from an emptying of meaning to a testing of trust. Jesus goes into the refiner's fire and refashions for us a new life out of the one from which all sin has been burnt away. Death is turned from the moment of absolute eternal isolation into the entrance to utter everlasting companionship. We call it heaven. We're given back our future as a gift, and not a threat. Everything is possible.

Christianity is simply this: the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting. If we have those, nothing can finally hurt us. If we don't have those, nothing can finally save us. This is the grain of the universe: our choice is whether to live with the grain or not.

There's no such thing as the present tense. Well there isn't any present tense, if there's no forgiveness and no life everlasting. But wait. If there is forgiveness – if the past is a gift; and if there is everlasting life – if the future's our friend: then for the first time we really can live – we really can breathe, we really can relax, we really can exist. Every detail of our lives is precious and wonderful and beautiful and meaningful, rather than passing and pitiful and feeble and futile. We can stand in the presence of God, because we are forgiven. And we can live in the presence of God forever, because we've been given everlasting life. We can really begin to live. That's the gospel.

Revisiting the Past

This isn't just the gospel the Church of England needs to proclaim to the nation. It's the gospel the church needs to proclaim to itself. We cannot live in the present if we are captivated by an imprisoning past and dominated by an intimidating future. Let's pause for a moment to see the simplicity of the story the church believes it's in. The story is simply this: the past was great; the future looks grim.

To coin an American phrase, this story is so many kinds of wrong. I want to spend this lecture unpicking how the first part of this story is wrong, and then unpicking how the second part is wrong. And then I want to tell you a new story which, as is the prophet's prerogative, I claim was the true story all along.

So let's start with the claim that the past was good. I may be mistaken, but I believe this means that there was a time when the great majority of the English were sincere Christians, or at least regular churchgoers; that the manners and morals of the people were extraordinarily high, and accordingly the people dwelt in perpetual piety, propriety, and plenty; that the standing of the Church of England in the hearts and loyalties of the nation was glorious, and deservedly so; and that the church, having too much faith and inspiration to keep to itself, published it abroad by converting the natives and advancing the kingdom in the benighted lands of the distant seas.

Of these four dimensions, the first – that once there was a higher proportion of churchgoers – and the fourth – that English missionaries played a significant role in the expansion of the global church – have a grain of truth in them. Let's not get carried away: in 1902, for example, a possible candidate for the claim of golden era when all was well, the London Religious Census suggested that around 18.6% of Londoners habitually attended church services, perhaps half of those Anglican ones.[1] But my scrutiny lies not so much on the first and fourth dimensions of this rosy nostalgic picture, but on those in between: that this was then a noble nation, in which the church raised the waterline of the harbour such that all the moral boats could justly float.

I want to give two examples, specifically targeted at what, once the 1966 World Cup victory is set aside, may be regarded as the two least-questioned moments of England's greatness. The first is what we might call the Last Night of the Proms narrative, in short, that Britons never never never shall be slaves. In other words, that Britain ruled the waves, a hegemony that made possible its industrial revolution, its economic supremacy, and its colonial heritage. What did ruling the waves mean in practice?

I went to school in Bristol. We all knew Bristol was a beautiful city. But we never seriously asked ourselves what made it beautiful. We all knew Bristol was, comparatively, a wealthy city. But we never seriously pondered what made it wealthy. We all know Bristol was, in the eighteenth century, the second city in the country, and a magnificent port. But we never enquired what made it so important and prominent. And here's the answer. Between 1730 and 1745, Bristol was the

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[1] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001) 148.

leading slaving port in the world. In the course of the eighteenth century around 500,000 slaves provided the profitable goods in the triangular trade between Bristol, West Africa, and the West Indies. My school was populated by the children of the wealthy merchants of Bristol. Those merchants made their wealth on the back of slaves crammed into the cargo-holds of transatlantic ships. We were the successors of those merchants. We would never be slaves. How ironic that bombastic claim sounds when put in such a context.

And before we say, but this was the society of its day, and not the church, let me tell you about a figure I studied as an undergraduate. Henry Philpotts was Bishop of Exeter from 1830-1869. He was not universally popular. Owen Chadwick describes him as 'a genuinely religious man with his religion concealed behind porcupine quills,' and Sydney Smith lamented, 'I must believe in the Apostolic Succession, there being no other way of accounting for the descent of the Bishop of Exeter from Judas Iscariot.'[2] He was so fierce in his views on baptismal regeneration that when he refused to institute a clergyman who disagreed with him, he threatened to excommunicate the Archbishop of Canterbury and anyone who supported his disputatious opponent. What I never discovered in my studies, but have more recently learned, is this giant of the Victorian church together with three business associates, invested in slave plantations in Jamaica, and when slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, they were paid compensation for the loss of no fewer than 665 slaves. Such was the church's prophetic word about slavery.

The second unquestioned moment of English glory is the glorious, brave, and sometimes solitary fight against the Nazis in the Second World War, a battle in defence of freedom and to save the Jews. Here I turn to another suppressed dimension of English history: its largely consistent record of anti-Semitism. If the story of slavery is epitomized by Bristol, the story of anti-Semitism may be represented by York. Richard de Malebisse was a nobleman whose extravagance got him into the hands of Jewish moneylenders. Embarrassed, he took the lead as the mob rose against the Jews in York in 1190, much as they did across the country. Fleeing the slaughter, 150 Jews holed up in the wooden keep of the royal castle, where they were besieged. Richard offered to spare them if they were baptised. Most refused, and took their own lives before setting fire to the keep. Some took up Richard's offer, and came down from the tower. Richard had their throats slit. A story like this takes the edge off the narrative that puts the English in a noble fight against the murderous Nazis. English history, to a disturbing degree, is different from the Holocaust more in degree than in kind. And again, lest one seek to exonerate the church, it was in England that was invented the deadly fiction of the blood libel, the accusation that Jews captured and murdered Christian children, to use their blood for ritual purposes.[3]

I hope I have done enough, through these two selected episodes, to demonstrate that the past was not a halcyon era of goodness, truth and beauty for the church, but a complex litany of at least as many sources of regret as of pride. One moment in my own pastoral experience sums up the interweaving of class, gender and religious distortions that leaves me with profoundly mixed feelings about the pastoral legacy of the church.

I went to see a woman of more senior years. She'd grown up in Wales. She'd left the church when she was a young woman. Ah, I thought, this is a familiar story. A young person is raised in the church but when they become a young adult either it turns out the faith hasn't taken deep root or they decide to get outside and smell a different air for a while. But clearly, now that she was over 90, she thought it was time to give the church a second chance. Took her time, I thought, but, fair enough, the church has been patiently waiting for you all this time, like the father did for the prodigal son. Curiosity led me to take a slight risk. 'May I ask what it was that led to you being away from the church for 75 years?' Nothing to lose, I thought. May learn something. But I forgot the first rule of the enquirer: never ask a question to which you might get an answer you're not ready to hear. I was in for a shock. I still haven't got over it.

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[2] Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* Part One (London: SCM 1997) 217; R.S. Lambert, *The Cobbett of the West* (London: Nicholson & Watson Limited, 1939) 39.

[3] Andrew Shanks, 'Honesty' in Samuel Wells and Sarah Coakley, editors, *Praying for England: Priestly Presence in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008) 125-45 at 127-8.

‘It was when we wanted to get married. We were in love. The rector wouldn’t marry us.’ Well, this sounds romantic, I thought, and, always a soft touch for the romantic twist on a story, I blundered in where angels fear to tread. ‘So was there something wrong,’ I wondered, ‘was your husband previously married, or were you too young, maybe?’ ‘No,’ she said calmly and, I now realise, trying hard not to be patronising or angry. ‘The rector looked at my hand. You see, I worked in a mill. I had an accident when I was 16.’ She held up her left hand. The last three fingers were missing. ‘The rector said that, since I didn’t have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he couldn’t marry us.’

The colour drained from my face. I reacted with the disbelieving half-laugh one coughs out when one hears something so ridiculous that it just has to be funny, but in fact of course isn’t funny at all but deeply, deeply horrifying. It was so absurd that no one could make it up. It had to be true. Quickly I felt that 75 years away from the church was pretty lenient. ‘And dare I ask what brings you back to the church now?’ I said, not having learned my lesson, but feeling I couldn’t go on without hearing her answer. ‘God’s bigger than the church,’ she replied. ‘I’ll be dead soon. The Lord’s Prayer says forgive if you want to be forgiven. So in the end that’s what I’ve decided to do.’

‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.’[4] Underlying the idea that the past was so good is a sense that the people of England have thrown away a precious gift out of their own irrationality and perversity. But that remarkable Welsh millworker taught me different. I was blessed she even considered it worth her time talking to me. It’s amazing anyone comes to church at all, given the way they’re too often treated. What saves the church are those like that millworker. After 75 years, she gives us another chance. I wonder whether we’ll seize that chance second time around.

Reimagining the Future

As a child I used to love going to the beach. Growing up in the West Country we had the unparalleled splendours of Weston-Super-Mare just an hour away. But if there wasn’t a sandy beach available, I wasn’t disheartened. Because that meant I could spend a half hour sorting through pebbles to find which ones looked like they would skim well. I would pick up a handful of stones, and sift through them tossing most of them aside until I found one that was worthy of being hurled, flat-side-down, into the incoming tide.

It’s something we do all the time. At the supermarket, we survey the apples or peaches or bananas and choose the ones with no bruises. On TV we enjoy shows where a person with talent is selected while their rivals slink into the corner, their hopes shattered. Any craftsperson will examine numerous paintbrushes, or pieces of wood, or images, before settling on the one to work on, and setting aside the rest.

I imagine everyone here has stood in the playground at primary school while two captains picked teams for a game of football or rounders or netball or touch rugby. There’s a fight over who’s going to be captains and then there’s celebrations and disappointments as good players are separated into teams. And then invariably comes the moment, as the better players become impatient to start while the stragglers are still waiting to be picked, when one of the captains says the immortal words, ‘I’ll have her and you can have the rest’ – while the rest are indicated with a dismissive sweep of the hand. You can have the rest. I wonder if you’re one of the rest, then or now. I wonder if you know what it means for your talents to be regarded as negligible and no one much to care who’s side you’re on. That dismissive sweep of the hand can be the defining point of a person’s life.

What’s it like to be those ones that are rejected? What’s it like to be that apple that’s tossed away, that piece of wood that’s useless, the rounders player that no one wants, that stone that the builders decide to set aside? Rejection keys into our profound feelings of unworthiness, of being useless, peripheral, no more than a passenger in a world full of drivers. It makes us feel stupid, ugly, and unlovable. It digs into a place that suggests, ‘This would all be much better without me.’

[4] William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* Act 1 Scene 2.

Either you fight the rejection and risk being seen as a person who just doesn't get it, or you accept the rejection and assume the identity of someone whom the world would be better off without.

I worked in a community for several years where one of the leaders once said to me, 'You know, we're a bunch of misfits who somehow fit together.' What he was recognising was that, rather than rebelling against feelings of rejection, we'd found if we worked constructively with them we could become something rather beautiful. People sometimes use the word inclusion but inclusion isn't really the right word. It isn't the right word because it suggests there are a bunch of people in the centre whose lives are normal and sorted and privileged, and they should jolly well open the doors and welcome people in and be a bit more thoughtful and kind and generous. The problem with this is that it's such a patronising and paternalistic model. When the community leader said, 'We're a bunch of misfits who somehow fit together,' he wasn't regarding himself as normal and secure and somehow above it all: he was one of the misfits too. He was reframing the whole idea that there was a centre and a periphery, where the centre gave kindly hospitality to the periphery, because the cost of that idea is that the periphery feels humiliated and the centre feels smug.

If you're looking for a cornerstone, the best place to look is among the stones that the builders have rejected. Over the last few years I've attended a number of events around dementia, disability, and faith. At one such evening what electrified the room was when a person with dementia and a person caring for a loved one with dementia each spoke with wisdom, courage, and truth. Those with dementia must be among the most rejected in our society, but that night it was brilliantly obvious that the Holy Spirit was speaking through them. One disability event began with a person with autism describing in unforgettable detail what it would have felt like for a person like him to be present in the crowd at the first Palm Sunday, and how the sensory overload would have done his head in. No one listening could ever see all the hosannas and palm branches in such an innocent way again. Some while ago I attended an event for single people, in which participants explored the advantages and disappointments, sadness and opportunity of being voluntarily or involuntarily single. Again it was a discovery of solidarity, wisdom, and hope. On another occasion there was an event for those fleeing oppressive societies on account of their sexual identity. These were stones the builders had rejected if you ever saw them: but coming together in the company of others who'd been rejected in different ways they could find inspiration and purpose beyond fear and escape.

One of the particular ministries my own church has developed is in what you might call acute pastoral services. We have gatherings for those affected by suicide, to support families of the missing, to remember victims of homicide, to commemorate those who've died homeless. The one thing that these occasions have in common is that they all proclaim that wisdom and faith are found in the places of exile and rejection. They're a reminder of how the Bible came to be written. Israel was in Babylon, in exile, captured and deported by the Chaldeans, dragged a thousand miles due east. It was angry, guilty, depressed, despairing, doubtful, paralysed, powerless. And what Israel did was to piece together the half-remembered stories of its people from a thousand years before, stories of slavery, escape, and freedom. Most crucial of all were the stories at the heart of the narrative, stories of the time in the wilderness, when slavery was a memory but true freedom was still out of reach. These stories were crucial because that's how Israel was feeling in a new wilderness called Babylon, in a desolate season called exile. We recognise the feeling: it's what it means to feel you're the stone the builders rejected. The exiles in Babylon wrote down their people's wilderness history, because it had important lessons for their own present and future. And what they came to realise was that they were closer to God in exile than they'd ever been in the promised land. That's the discovery on which the whole Bible rests.

When Peter stands before the Sanhedrin in Acts chapter 4, called to account for how he has enabled a crippled beggar to walk, he looks back into Israel's story, in which God had founded the kingdom not on any of Jesse's tall and powerful sons, but on David, the youngest and weakest. Peter quotes Psalm 118, which describes the choosing of David with the words, 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' And Peter identifies that rejected stone as Jesus. In his crucifixion he was rejected by the builders – yet in his resurrection he became the cornerstone of forgiveness and eternal life.

Think for a moment about the way the Church of England sees itself. It's built churches all around the country that mostly look like centres of power and authority. It's extended hospitality in a sometimes clumsy but mostly generous-hearted desire to welcome the misfit and the stranger. But it feels it's losing its grip on the country. I wonder whether that's because the critical mass of the sorted and normal no longer assumes church is part of what it means to be sorted and normal – or whether the whole idea of a sorted and normal centre was profoundly flawed all along. It could well be that fewer people attend church services. But a whole lot more people are belonging to support groups for parents of Down Syndrome children or relatives of those killed in road traffic accidents. And when you attend such gatherings they sometimes feel a good deal more engaged, alive, and focused than a lot of church services. What I saw at the evening on dementia and faith was something that felt like the renewal of the church. It felt like the church was finding a new cornerstone – a cornerstone made up of stones that the builders had rejected.

The recently released film *Pride* tells the true story of a group of lesbian and gay activists in London in 1984. They realise that the way society, media and government despise them is equivalent to the way the same forces think about the miners, who are in the midst of their titanic struggle with the Thatcher government. The lesbian and gay activists get it into their heads to reach out to a depressed mining village in South Wales. The film shows how with patience and forgiveness, grace and solidarity, and a lot of courage and resilience, prejudices on both sides are gradually broken down and an amazing alliance grows up. The film ends with coachloads of miners coming unanticipated to join the 1985 Gay Pride march in London. It's an astonishing turnaround. Together these two groups of stones that the builders have rejected set side bitterness and self-pity and find they've become one another's cornerstone. A bunch of misfits somehow, beautifully, movingly, somehow fit together. It's an icon of what church can be; what church should be.

The Church of England is down in the dumps because it thinks it needs to be full of big and strong and powerful people. But Jesus was the stone the builders rejected; and in his ministry he surrounded himself with stones that the builders had rejected. Jesus didn't found the church on the so-called centre – the sorted, the normal, the benevolent and condescending. Jesus assumed the church would always need the work of the Holy Spirit – the work or miracle, of subversion, of turning the world upside-down. Nothing has changed – except for a lot of the intervening years the church has forgotten who Jesus was and whose company he kept.

We're not talking about a bland and affirming insight that a lot of people who've been overlooked in life turn out to have some important things to contribute. That's true, but what Peter sees in Acts chapter 4 is rather more radical than that. The stone that the builders rejected didn't find a place in the wall somewhere by being thoughtfully included like a last-minute addition to a family photo. The rejected stone became the cornerstone, the keystone – the stone that held up all the others, the crucial link, the vital connection. That's what ministry's all about – not condescendingly making welcome alienated strangers, but seeking out the rejected *precisely because they are the energy and the life-force that will transform us all*. Every pastor, every missionary, every evangelist, every disciple should have these words over their desk, their windscreen, on their screensaver, in the photo section of their wallet, wherever they see it all the time – the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. *If you're looking for where the future church is coming from, look at what the church and society has so blithely rejected*. The life of the church is about constantly recognising the sin of how much we have rejected, and celebrating the grace that God gives us back what we once rejected to become the cornerstone of our lives. That's what prophetic ministry means.

And here we've come to the theological heart of the church. On the night before he died Peter rejected Jesus. He denied him three times. Jesus was the stone Peter rejected. But Peter became the stone, the rock on which the church was founded, and Jesus, the rejected one, became the keystone. Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected. And Peter was one of those builders. But Jesus renamed Peter the stone, and in so doing made him the cornerstone. The church is founded on and comprised of stones that the builders rejected. The challenge for the church is to see Jesus in the face of the one we have rejected. And to let the Jesus we discover in them become our cornerstone.

Rediscovering the Present

Having recognised that the past wasn't perhaps so great as it's generally assumed to be, and having realized that God has given us all the future we could wish for by making the stones that the church has so long rejected the cornerstone, it's time to conclude by reassessing the present.

Andrew Shanks, from whom I learned the story of Richard de Malebisse cited earlier, believes the church is called to live the resurrection today by becoming a pioneeringly honest ex-oppressor community. To be a prophetic church means to live the significance of the forgiveness of sins that heals the past and the life everlasting that opens out the future. It is to make both that which is gone and regretted and that which is unknown and awaited our friend.

We inhabit a world that pumps out false histories through propaganda, airbrushes our mistakes through paying someone to cleanse our google profile, forks out a fortune on reputation management, is quick to take offence at every tweeted comment, and ready to call the lawyers when threatened with publication of salacious revelations. At the same time we have a culture that cultivates bitterness, that for every disappointment or failure seeks a culprit to blame, that feels entitled to well-being and affluence and that is quick to resent and distrust and suspect and revile. In other words we take for granted that our past is divided between the sin that shrouds us in shame and the victimhood that fills us with fury.

Meanwhile we dwell in a world that assumes despair about the future and consequently offers us ever-more sophisticated forms of perpetual distraction, limitless expectations for the life-prolonging powers of medicine, fantasies of perpetual youth through fitness or cosmetics, and regular oblivion through legal or illegal drugs. At the same time we live in almost total denial about the inevitability of death, constant impulses to fix the mortal limitations that will ever elude solutions, and an almost total obsession with instrumental goods such as money and celebrity without any sustained discourse about what such goods might be for. In other words we take for granted that our future is divided between suppressing the anxiety of the unknown and diverting our attention toward the tangible and the tractable.

Thus the prophetic witness of the church is to live in the present tense. Not a provisional present tense that relies on forgetfulness and denial of the past and oblivion and distraction from the future; but a present tense that embodies true peace, which is reconciliation toward the past and embrace of the future, in all their respective complexities and challenges. A prophetic church is to be found recognising the sins of the past, its complicity in the evil that periodically pervades a whole culture, its perpetration of perversities and cruelties that betray its calling, its embodiment of personal shortcomings and corporate shame, and walking alongside those that have committed themselves to make a similar pilgrimage of pain and hope. If people say, 'Why do you keep dwelling on the negative?' the answer is, 'Because we want to know the freedom Christ brings, and we can only know that freedom if we recognise how deeply enmeshed we have been in falsehood, and if we take steps to tell a truthful story, make recompense, seek atonement, long for reconciliation, and thus find healing and resurrection.'

Meanwhile a prophetic church is to be found divesting itself of its fears about the future, its desire to control outcomes, shore up against the ravages of limitation and death, and create a Tower of Babel so secure that the Holy Spirit can't ruin it. And it's to be experienced alongside those facing the unknown of their own death, the limitation of their own capacity or health, the forfeit of their imagined future by calamity or malevolence, and the diffidence or despair resulting from repeated unkindness or disappointment. If people say, 'Why do you insist on being with the poor?' the answer is, 'Because we want to meet God face to face, and we believe God is most present among those who seem to have no future, who are without an insurance policy against disaster, whose entire hope on God is founded, who live for Christ alone.'

Above all a prophetic church, a pioneeringly honest ex-oppressor church, is a community of humility. In the face of the future we realise we are not God; in the face of the past we realise neither have we been fully human. Hear these withering words of Ludwig Feuerbach: 'Faith gives a

man a peculiar sense of his own dignity and importance. The believer finds himself distinguished above other men, exalted above the natural man; he knows himself to be a person of distinction, in the possession of peculiar privileges; believers are aristocrats, unbelievers plebeians. God is this distinction between and pre-eminence of believers above unbelievers, personified.'[5] Christianity has frequently become a pretext for arrogance, and a cover for complacency: such that a critic like Feuerbach can see faith and love at war, and thus perceive the need to assert a pure, atheist virtue of love in the face of the ghastly legacy of faith.

A true humility eschews any such arrogance, and realises we can only have a past if we receive it back from our neighbour, and that we can only have a future if we welcome it from the heart of God, to whom it belongs. Only thus can we discover for ourselves and offer to our culture what both most need: the grace to dwell in the present tense.

[5] Quoted in Dominic Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx* (Oxford: OUP 2016) 237.