

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 24th December 2018

We went out for breakfast this morning, my wife and my son and I, and at the table next to us was a new-born baby, a boy, who must have been no more than two or three weeks old. New-borns are usually swaddled and lying in a cot, but this one was out-and-about on Christmas Eve enjoying breakfast in a restaurant amidst the lights of Princes Street.

For almost everyone in this world it is a privilege, an absolute privilege, to be born. As Professor Richard Dawkins wrote some years ago, we are the lucky ones. He wrote,

The potential people that could have been here in our place, but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sands grains of Arabia... In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.

For almost everyone who has ever lived, it has been a privilege to be born in to this world. But, not just a privilege, it is also a trepidation, a feeling of fear or alarm. For, when it comes to life, what is more fragile, more vulnerable in this world than a new-born baby? That is what I was thinking this morning, watching that new-born boy at the table next to me struggle, manfully, to hold his head up as his parents squeezed the cutest little bobble-hat on to his head.

We are all privileged - and vulnerable, we who were once new-born babies. But, not just as new-born babies, are we privileged and vulnerable, but we are privileged and vulnerable throughout our lives.

I was thinking about the relationship between privilege and vulnerability earlier this year, in May, when Prince Harry married Meghan Markle. That wedding cost thirty-two million pounds, thirty-two million pounds; there is privilege, quantified. But, vulnerability?

The poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, wrote a poem for that wedding, which in its opening two lines captured the vulnerability of the day. She wrote,

*It should be private, the long walk
on bereavement's hard stones;*

Those lines will resonate with anyone who remembers the 6th of September 1997, the day Prince Harry buried his mother; the day when he, a privileged twelve-year-old boy - a twelve-year-old boy - was exposed to the full glare of the watching world, as he walked behind his mother's coffin. With prefigured irony, thirty-two million people - thirty-two million people - around the world watched that boy make that walk. *It should be private, the long walk on bereavement's hard stones;*

For as long as he lives that man, the future King's second son, will always be, in the minds of those who watched that funeral in 1997, a privileged, but devastatingly vulnerable 12-year old boy. In her poem for his wedding, Carol Anne Duffy's words go on to hope that maybe, just maybe, the 32-million-pound wedding might finally have saved that boy from the enduring glare of the 32 million pairs of eyes that

watched him 21 years previously.

She thinks it might, because in that wedding she sees the connection not between privilege and vulnerability, but the connection between vulnerability and love. How could your heart not go out to a twelve-year-old boy who has to make that long walk? How could your heart not go out to that boy who 21 years later married someone who loves him for the man he has become?

Of course, it should be private. But, one of the lessons of that time was a reminder that the seed of love is sown in vulnerability, whereas the shadow of doubt descends when privilege and power remains distant, cold, and unreachable; cloistered in a castle.

You see, no one can build a relationship of love with anyone else, ever, by being distant, cold, unreachable, domineering, all-powerful. The only way to build a relationship of love with someone is to give up some of the power you have, and thereby become vulnerable.

Successful marriages, for example, aren't built on one person exercising dominant power over the other, but on two people making themselves vulnerable by revealing their most fragile feelings for each other. If you want to have a relationship with your children, you have to give up some of your power over them at some point. If nothing else, you have to become vulnerable enough to be able to say sorry to them when you are wrong.

If you're a boss and you want a productive relationship with the people who work for you, then you can't be a dictator, you have to delegate - at least - and thereby become vulnerable to the abilities and competencies of others. If as a country we want to have an enduring, peaceful, economically productive relationship with other countries, we can't pull up the drawbridge, and wall up our borders, we have to become at least a little bit vulnerable by giving up some of our own sovereignty and broadening our definition of what it is to be British.

So, if a loving relationship is found in exposed vulnerability rather than in cloistered privileged power, how would you do it if you were God? If you were privileged enough to be God, how would you do it? How would you build a relationship with human beings? What would be the best way of doing that? Would you choose to be an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing, monarch of a God, cocooned in heaven, distant, unreachable, cold, and rule with the threat of fire and brimstone? Do you think that would work? If you were privileged enough to be God, would that work as a way of building a relationship with humanity?

It wouldn't. There is only one way to do it. If as a god you wanted to build a relationship with human beings, you would have to give up your power, your sovereignty, your dominance, and become vulnerable. Indeed, so powerful are gods that, if you were a god and you wanted to build a relationship with human beings, you would have to become as vulnerable and fragile as a new-born baby, you couldn't hold anything back because so powerful are gods that if you did hold something back, it would cast a shadow of doubt over your love.

Becoming as vulnerable and fragile as a new-born baby is the only way you could build a relationship of love with human beings. But, there would be a cost of course. The cost is, when you are that vulnerable, that fragile, when you have given up so much power there will always be those who will feel threatened by your vulnerability, who will be jealous of your love and who will have the power themselves to crucify you.

They crucified his mother in that way. She was privileged and vulnerable. She had given up power for love, and they got her eventually, after a chase into a tunnel in Paris. And, they got him as well, this new born baby whose birth we celebrate tomorrow; they crucified him too.

Is it worth it? Is love, which can only be gained by becoming vulnerable and fragile, worth the threat of crucifixion? That is a question for another day. You'll need to come back at Easter for the answer to that question.

But for today, as we celebrate on this Christmas Eve night the birth of Jesus Christ, the only thing we need to know, is that the only way to believe that God exists in this world, rather than in heaven, is if he enters into a loving relationship with us as a vulnerable, fragile new born baby. There is no other road out of heaven, only that very same painful, vulnerable journey, which every one of us has to take, from our mother's womb into this world.

Of course, we are not privileged gods, and so we don't have to decide how we are going to build a relationship with human beings in that way. But, although we are not gods, yet still we are living in this world, and we do have to decide how we are going to live in this world with other people: with people we share a home with, a family with, a community with, a country with, a world with.

Tomorrow morning when you wake up on Christmas day, the day we celebrate the birth of the God of the universe, the king of kings, the lord of lords who made his appearance in this world as a vulnerable, fragile new-born baby lying in manger, why don't you ask yourself – lying there in your bed - how will I step in to the world today? How will I step in to the lives of other people today? How will I relate to those I live with, live amongst, share this world with? Will I do it seeking the privileges that power brings, or in vulnerability, seeking the love that fragility offers?