

PD James, the crime fiction author who gave us the detective Adam Dalgliesh of New Scotland Yard, once wrote that she found it interesting

that the detective hero, originated by Conan Doyle, has survived and is still at the heart of the story, like a secular priest [,] expert in the extraction of confession, whose final revelation of the truth confers a vicarious absolution on all but the guilty

but she went on to note that things were changing. And indeed they have. The heroic investigator has given way to the anti-hero, to the detective who (even if successful in identifying the murderer) is a rather sad character. Perhaps you have seen some of them on TV or read of them in novels: maybe the most famous is Henning Mankell's *Wallander*, once described as has been described as 'a fat, divorced southerner who is so burned out that he can hardly make it to work', suffering diabetes and depression; then there's *Martin Beck*, liable to frequent stomach aches and nausea; Staalesen's *Varg Veum* and Nesbø's *Harry Hole* are alcoholics; *Van Veeteren* has cancer; and *Martin Rohde* of *The Bridge* worries that his vasectomy has removed his masculinity.

These middle-aged Nordic men are pale inheritors of the Viking tradition, but they are maybe recognisable by many of males in later mid-life, health a little compromised by over-eating and perhaps smoking and alcohol consumption, no longer feeling themselves to be at the top of their game, prone to depression and uncertainty about themselves and their future, a little

sad in their personal lives. (I speak of course of these fictional detectives, not of myself!) Even *Inspector Morse* is a bit of a loner, slightly out of kilter with the contemporary world, a bit curmudgeonly.

There's what I think is a lovely passage in the Wallander series, in *The Fifth Woman*, certainly one that resonates with me. Linda, his daughter, is asking him about why he is finding it so difficult to adjust to Swedish society as it has become. This is his reply:

Sometimes I think it's because we've stopped darning our socks. When I was growing up, Sweden was still a country where people darned their socks. I even learned how to do it in school myself. Then suddenly one day it was over. Socks with holes in them were thrown out. No one bothered to repair them anymore. The whole society changed, 'wear it out and toss it' was the only rule ...<sup>1</sup>.

It's not simply a matter of feeling sad that old familiar habits have passed into history. It's more even than an ecologically-minded regret at our disposable consumerism that casts aside not only what is damaged but what has fallen out of fashion. Mankell through Wallander remembers 'a time when we darned our socks. When we didn't throw everything away, whether it was our woollen socks *or human beings*': '*or human beings*'. Back in 2008, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, delivered a new year message that was filmed not only at his cathedral but at a waste disposal centre. Like Wallander, he lamented not only our failure to recycle, but how this disposability seeps into other aspects of our society. This was his message:

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<sup>1</sup> Mankell, Henning (2012) *The Fifth Woman*, pp. 223-24. Trans. ST Murray. London: Vintage.

What I wonder [says Dr Williams] is - how much this influences attitudes in other parts of our lives? In a society where we think of so many things as disposable; where we expect to be constantly discarding last year's gadget and replacing it with this year's model - do we end up tempted to think of people and relationships as disposable? Are we so fixated on keeping up with change that we lose any sense of our need for stability? ...

And if we live in a context where we construct everything from computers to buildings to relationships on the assumption that they'll need to be replaced before long - what have we lost? ... God is involved in 'building to last', in creating a sustainable world and sustainable relationships with us human beings. He doesn't give up on the material of human lives. He doesn't throw it all away and start again. And he asks us to approach one another and our physical world with the same commitment. The life of Jesus, the life in which God identifies completely with our flesh and blood is the supreme sign of that commitment.

God doesn't do waste.

He doesn't regard anyone as a 'waste of space', as not worth his time ... And so a life that communicates a bit of what God is like, is a life that doesn't give up - that doesn't settle down with a culture of waste and disposability - whether with people, or with things.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Archbishop's New Year Message 2008 - God 'Doesn't Do Waste', Tuesday 1st January 2008.  
<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1704/archbishop-new-year-message-2008-god-doesnt-do-waste>

How vital it is to put people first, to value people as our most important asset, and more than that, to value them simply because human beings are of highest worth and deepest significance. Yet, we are recklessly and (I would say sometimes) tragically unmindful of the human dimension in what we do. Folk can become almost 'collateral damage' when we do not hold people in the forefront of our thinking in all the decisions we make. Yet, surely where people's gifts are nurtured, where they are treated as more than pew fodder, where folk's ideas are respected, where their contribution is encouraged and their participation positive, where the organisation where people feel cherished, then there is a healthy community.

Rather readily, of course, Wallander's reflections could be said to be 'mere nostalgia', old woollen socks to be cast aside. Of course, there is a form of nostalgia that is a false memory either of mythic Good Old Days in which the bad is obliterated or concealed or where past virtues are exaggerated or everything sentimentalised. It would be folly to imagine that there is some ideal past which we ought to remember and re-fashion in the present. Yet, Wallander's reflections challenge the idea that memory has *nothing* to teach us, is redundant, worthless, a fake reconstruction, even a hindrance to progress.

Our Old Testament lection this evening counsels hearers: 'Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you'<sup>3</sup>. I acknowledge that there is in that passage a hint of something of a primeval mythic past, but nonetheless it is an affirmation of cherishing and holding and affirming

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 32:7

and drawing upon the inherited collective memory, preserved in the wisdom of past generations.

I should not want for a moment to reject the need for fresh directions or for re-appraisal of how we do things or for new ideas and experimentation. The Church, as much as any part of society, is finding itself in uncertain territory. Eric Hobsbawm, the historian, observed that

it has for the first time become possible to see what a world may be like in which the past, including the past in the present, has lost its role, in which the old maps and charts which guided human beings, singly and collectively, through life no longer represents the landscape through which we move, the sea on which we sail. In which we do not know where our journey is taking us, or even ought to take us<sup>4</sup>.

There are no historic lessons that can provide us with a template for the future, but that is not the same as saying that we can lightly or safely dispense with the collective memories as if 'progress' demanded that we leave it all behind.

While the dictum of Edmund Burke that 'those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it' is rooted in an over-valuing of the wisdom of our forebears<sup>5</sup>, it is often foolish to take no heed to experience and to rush headlong into replicating the mistakes we have made in the past. Yet, I think the casting aside of the collective memory has a deeper error. The term 'radicalisation' has threatening resonances today, but if we are called to a radical future, then we might remember that the term 'radical' is related to radix/ root. The radical option may be not to cast aside the past but to rediscover the

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<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric (1995) *The Age of Extremes*, p. 16. London: Abacus.

<sup>5</sup> Burke, Edmund *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, P. Langford (general editor), Oxford, Clarendon Press

values and intentions of the past. For those of us who are rooted in the Scottish Congregationalist tradition, these might include the centring of the Church in the local fellowship, a liberal understanding of faith and life, a suspicion of ecclesiastical authority, a commitment to mission, a love of learning, an openness to the mind of Christ and the movement of the Spirit in our midst, the full participation of each and all, a Scottish way of being, a radical democratic view of political life ... Why would we treat these as frayed woollen socks to be cast aside? Are they not, rather, the strands that need still to make up the fabric of our common life? Are they not the threads of hopefulness that hold together what we have been, what we are and what we are called to be? We shall not 'manage' our way through these challenging times. The darning Spirit of God weaves together a living past, a renewed present and a future beyond our imagining.

This ecclesiastical sock is inevitably not a pretty thing. It will not rival the new-bought one for attractiveness. Yet, it is itself a lesson in living with imperfections. In this time of recollection of The Reformation, we realise that reform is not the business of starting all over again, afresh. This darning mends and makes do; weaknesses will develop and re-emerge; some repairs will prove more successful than others; we do not know how long our work will hold together; there will be tension between the old and the new. None of this can or should be avoided.

We celebrate this night the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We recall how Jesus takes the weak and damaged, worn and frayed community of his disciples, soon to be torn apart but bound together by his love for them and by the faith that now brings them together as his body.

Tonight, our College says farewell to two of its students. Gifted though they undoubtedly are, they bear inevitably the imperfections of human living - do not burden them with expectations that they should be other than they are. They will have their points of strength and weakness; there will be wear and tear from the challenges that ministry amongst you will develop; they will have need of gentle minding and mending from time to time to strengthen them and renew them.

'Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice', we read in the Second Letter to the Corinthians.<sup>6</sup> This evening marks a 'finally' for me also; the last time I shall speak to our Annual College Service as Principal. As I do not relinquish my office for some months, it is premature to say too much of a Goodbye, but it does add for me a particular poignancy to this farewelling of our ordinands.

They and some of you will expect no less than that I turn to Grundtvig for some words of farewell. As a young man he had served as a teacher at the Schouboe Institute, an advanced grammar school and in 1811 he bade farewell to the pupils in the top class. In it he refers to the Living Word of God, that is the divine Word that is encountered not only in Scripture but in Christ himself and wherever people who love life share the word of life through the life of the Spirit.

Grundtvig wrote to them:

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:11-14

Oh, if you ever held me in respect -  
and if with some I had the lucky chance  
of winning you with my respect and love -  
believe me, it was done for your own good!  
So follow now the one true shining light,  
which has alone the highest pow'r divine,  
through darkness of the grave can brightly shine  
and into heaven lead us all aright!  
Believe me, I have pondered over long  
what they call 'wisdom' from our days of old,  
and what there is is what I have here found:  
That using reason solely, all we learn  
of God and of ourselves is but the half,  
is but profane, obscure, and dark and cold!  
And only the Living divine Word revealed to us  
can be believed and best safeguard the soul!

So go your separate ways with faith and love ...  
This is all the thanks which I desire.<sup>7</sup>

Andy and Stewart, God bless you as you step forward into new  
ministry and a fresh stage in life.

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<sup>7</sup> Grundtvig, NFS (1811) 'Farewell to my Pupils in the top class of the Schouboe Institute. Trans/ed.. Edward Broadbridge in *Living Well-Springs. The hymns, songs and poems of NFS Grundtvig*. Aarhus UP

## **Benediction**

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for fullness in Christ, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.