

The Dimensions of Faith

Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21

In my first year at North Berwick High School Monday afternoon, double Technical Drawing, was my idea of Hell. Mr Turner (who in reality was a kindly old gentleman) used to walk about and down the drawing tables, admiring the graphs, designs, and architectural expertise of my classmates. He would pass by my desk and sigh, "Ah, Derek is still trying to master the hexagon." "It's a square", I hissed. Bitter, bitter days that scarred me for life.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "dimension" as, "A measurable extent of a particular kind, such as length, breadth, depth, or height." It is a fundamental component in building things and making things. Dimension measures things out. Dimension gives shape and size and form. Dimension gives perspective. Dimension helps us not only how to imagine something but to realise it. Dimension defines what is small and intimate, and what is vast and global.

You can apply the idea of dimension not only to buildings, like this one and the new additions we have made in recent years, but to things that are more difficult to quantify, but on which we need to have perspective, and ought to comprehend.

What, for example, is the dimension of beauty? In a person is it the hour-glass figure, or the square-cut jaw? Is it the colour of hair, or the position of a dimple? Or in music, what are the dimensions of beautiful music? The chords and keys, the rhythm and metre, the ebb and flow of expression as the notes weave together? What are the dimensions of beauty in a painting, or a building, or a book, or a poem?

I suspect the dimensions of beauty have something to do with the way we are moved, touched, and engaged by the object or person.

What are the dimensions of a relationship? What are the heights of a relationship or indeed the depths of relationship? Few if any relationships are uniformly and unswervingly perfect. They have highs and lows. Relationships have dimensions; it is how we gain perspective on them. It is how we know that they are working, or not working. It is how we decide to repair them or

refurbish them, or maybe even to end them and start again. There is no such thing as a relationship that has flat dimensions.

When Paul was writing to the Church at Ephesus, he was writing to a new community of Christians who had not quite got what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. They had misunderstood some of Paul's teaching about morality and were a little too easy-going. They also were intolerant of their Jewish brothers and sisters and forgetful that the roots of Christianity are in the Jewish tradition. Paul tells his readers that Jesus expects loyalty and obedience, and that following Him is not going to be easy all of the time and will require a great deal.

Paul also tells his readers that they should not forget their past. The story of the Children of Israel, their successes and failures, their faithfulness and their forgetfulness when it comes to God is also part of the Christian story. It's part of our faith DNA. We learn from the history of the Children of Israel, both the good and the bad. It provides length and breadth and height and depth to our faith.

What are the dimensions of faith? "Religion today has become a countercultural force. It has been marginalised. Look for religion in the press, and you will find that it is usually the story of a priest or vicar in a sex-scandal case, or it is in the weekend section somewhere between the gardening and travel pages. God has become part of the leisure industry."ⁱ

G K Chesterton, that English writer who is sometimes described as the 'prince of paradox' once planned to write a story about a man who set off to sail to Australia and by accident travelled in a circle and landed on the shores of the country from which he had set off. He did not realise his mistake, and so everything that greeted his eye had the air of the exotic. Home became a foreign country. That is the fate of religion in our time. It has become so old that it is something new. It has been so neglected that we can see it for the first time.

When Paul writes to those Christians in and around Ephesus, he wasn't saying they needed a doctorate in theology to understand what faith was about, or the naïveté to believe. He wanted them to apprehend the dimensions of faith and see how it would begin to open up to the scale

and wonder of God's saving love, and the length, depth, height and breadth of how that love should have an impact on the way they lived their lives. Nothing could be excluded from the all-encompassing, overwhelming nature of God's love. God's love changes everything, if people will open their hearts and minds and bodies and souls to it.

"Faith is about the dignity of the personal, that strange, unique ability we have to imagine alternative futures, act on the basis of that imagination, and thus begin to change the world. It is about those dimensions of being human that cannot be captured by any scientific theory, because they occupy the realm where cause and effect cease and human creativity begins... Science, politics and economics, the three great forces of our world, are impersonal. That is their strength...it is also their weakness...for there is something about being human that they will never capture... That is why (faith) is uniquely powerful, because it takes the personal and turns it into living structures that honour (being a person) – families, communities, narratives, rituals, traditions, customs, holy times, prayers."ⁱⁱ

"The dimensions of faith at its best are countercultural. When it has no power, only influence, no authority, except that which it earns, no claim to people's attention other than by the way it creates values that cannot be found elsewhere. Faith becomes a perennially and startlingly new voice redeeming us from loneliness, framing our existence with meaning, and teaching us to remember what so much else persuades us to forget – that the possibilities of happiness are all around us, if we would only open our eyes and give thanks."ⁱⁱⁱ

What are the dimensions of your faith? How does it impact the things you say, the things you think, and the things you do? Is your faith something that has many dimensions, living, moving, changing, and dynamic? Or is it something that has grown flat, and stale, and featureless? Does your faith help you be something; does your faith impel you to do something to make a difference? Or is your faith limp and inert, withering for lack of attention, nourishment and interest?

"Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."^{iv} A few days ago a

very dear old friend of mine died. She was 98. She had been there for me at a very painful, confusing and shattering time in my teenage years when my family disintegrated. Diana never preached to me or gave me improving books to read. In fact, the only lesson I remember her giving me was how to make the best mushroom soup ever and add to it her secret ingredient, a decent glug of sherry (try it when the weather gets colder and thank me later).

What she taught me, however, was the breadth, length, height and depth of Christian faith. Broad enough to encompass everyone; long enough to last for eternity; high enough to touch the realm of heaven itself; deep enough for anyone to find endless love and grace and peace and hope after any trouble.

She did that for me, and consciously and unconsciously I have tried to do the same with my faith for the people I meet. Not always with success, but you keep trying, you keep living it out loud, you keep seeking to make a difference for good. To attempt that gets close to what the apostle Paul wrote about, “to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge....filled with all the fullness of God.”

Let these be the dimensions of your faith.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Jonathan Sacks, 'Celebrating Life' p190

ⁱⁱ ibid pps191-192

ⁱⁱⁱ ibid p192

^{iv} Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*