

A PARISHIONER'S REFLECTION - INTRINSIC DIGNITY

My name is Richard Murphy. I am a member of the parish and grateful to be part of a dynamic faith community.

Over the last 6 years I have had the privilege of completing my doctoral studies on a part-time basis. I explored how we experience each other's intrinsic dignity in day-to-day life.

This involved spending time with a Christian day community, Boaz. Boaz is based on and runs a farm. It includes a few staff, volunteers and members with learning difficulties. I explored how the people at Boaz experience each other's worth. I found that our experience communicates to us that we have a limited and contingent worth. For example, we suffer, experience injustice and judgement. We fall short of who we think we should be.

However, when we live in relationships of humble care for each other we experience the possibility of a worth that goes beyond our value in the world. Through giving his life for us in the crucifixion, resurrection and eucharist, Jesus has shown us the way. Cn. John has allowed me to share reflections on my research and faith with you. Through the Spirit, I pray they give life.

For my doctorate I explored how we experience and witness each person's intrinsic dignity in day-to-day life. My studies were influenced by three parts of my life. Firstly, my time as a social worker being trained in human rights, secondly my experience of being a father of Rose and Eve, who have Down syndrome and last but not least, my faith in Christ. During my studies my faith was an indirect but powerful influence. I approached the experience in philosophical terms. This reflection is my chance to give testimony in a more direct way to how Christ is at the centre of everything.

The research grew out of an experience of contradiction. I was schooled in the beliefs that all of us are born equal with an intrinsic dignity. This was my daily rhetoric but not quite the air I breathed. I remember speaking to someone who had just had a child born with a disability. I said all the right things and emphasised how that child has equal worth and dignity. Yet, I distinctly remember that afterwards I thought, 'thank goodness that is not me'. Little did I know that we would have two children born with Down syndrome.

At some stage in life we are all confronted by the seeming contradiction or paradox of intrinsic dignity. If we understand dignity simply as our worth, intrinsic means that our worth exists in ourselves and not dependent on a system of evaluation outside of ourselves. Yet in the world our worth depends on how we are weighed in the scales. Our degree of intelligence, our physical beauty, our wealth. These have real world

consequences. For example, life expectancy is largely dictated by whether we share in a deprived or affluent area or whether we are born with a disability or not.

On the level of theory this contradiction is evident as on the one hand we have to think about what gives our life worth and meaning in order to identify what rights we should be ensured. For example, the right to life, to food all the way up to the right to political engagement and the right to worship. On the other hand, as soon as we theorise what gives us worth we create a way of judging the worth of each other's lives. In today's culture, Kittay a female philosopher, talks about us being captive of and worshipping the myth of the disembodied twenty something that never ages, suffers, experiences disability or needs anyone else. This is not just an abstract idea but a visceral and heavy scale that bears into our skin. We feel it and it can be heard in the most common reason for considering euthanasia, 'When all I am is a burden, is my life worth living?'.

Simply put, we have a sense of or at least a desire for intrinsic worth, yet our experience of life witnesses a sense of limited and contingent worth. We suffer, we die, we experience cruelty and injustice. We live our life with an idea of what a good person is that we have to achieve but each day are confronted by the reality that we are not that person. This experience weighing on me led me to ask if there is another way we bear witness to each other's intrinsic worth.

The Church teaches us that we are born in the image and likeness of God. One of the key things about God is that we don't encounter God as object to be defined, classified and positioned in our vision of the world. God is always the one we know only in what an encounter with God asks of us. How it calls us into question, moves us outside of ourselves. So it is with each other. I encounter the other person's intrinsic dignity not as an object to be defined but as a command that calls me into question. I experience it as a command that calls me to respond in responsibility in the vulnerability of life. It is my response to this call that defines me and witnesses to the other their worth.

In my research I spent time with a Christian community based on a farm in the New Forest, Boaz. It was a day community made up of members with learning disabilities, volunteers and staff. I explored how members of the community experienced their own and other people's worth. What I found was that this worth was experienced in a humble witness of being for the other person. This was both in the profound moments of life such as birth and death but also the simple things like not leaving the other person alone in their celebration and sharing food or nature.

One member, Bernadean, had grown very fond of a guinea pig. When this guinea pig died she experienced her worth in the way others buried it for her with respect. When the farm bought a new guinea pig she cared for it as a mother. She described it being skittish at first but then getting to know her and respecting her if she showed respect. She understood its feelings, 'like a friend'. Bernadean had a friend, Tara. Tara is also a

member. She is middle aged. She had a boyfriend who was given a cancer diagnosis. When Bernadean found out about this, she wanted Tara to know that 'she is lovely' and 'means everything'. Bernadean wanted Tara to experience the love of having a guinea pig and gave it to her.

Tara shared her story with me. When we spoke she would move from topic to topic and get distracted. Yet in a moment of pure clarity she told me about her boyfriend being diagnosed with cancer. She shared that his dying wish was for her to have a meal with him and attend his funeral. She said, 'It was his dying wish, so I thought alright'. She was sad to go to the funeral but she was there with all the people she cared about. She also shared with me the joy of being an aunty to her niece who is two. She clapped and her face exploded in a smile of sheer joy. I felt both of these experiences came from the same place in her. The potential to be for the other person, before our thought about it. A possibility of being for the other that is baked into us.

There were many other examples, such as a staff member seeing a reserved member start to dance to music with a different member and then her joining them in celebration as they danced to the Tanoy music in a supermarket. There was also Tony who was less verbal in his communication but who would welcome everyone with a fist pump and ask them to sit with him. This simple witness of welcome had a profound effect on a volunteer who arrived for the first time and was unsure if they would fit in. He said it made him realise that it is not good enough to just think about your own life, you have to reach out to others.

When I sought to understand the meaning of these experiences, I drew on a Catholic philosopher, Jean Luc Marion and a Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas. This led me to realise that when we encounter our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others it calls our sense of worth in the world into question. When we allow ourselves to be touched by the vulnerability of others we experience a command to respond in responsibility to them in the situation they find themselves in. Although, it is a command it does not compel us but confronts us as a call which we can engage with or turn away from. Tara did not have to share a meal with her boyfriend or attend his funeral. Yet, she allowed herself to be changed by his life. In doing so she bore witness to his intrinsic worth in the vulnerability of her own body. She shared food with him, shed tears for him and endured the pain of loss.

The call always asks something of us, a sacrifice. For example, the staff member had to risk looking stupid when dancing. At the same time when we respond it creates a dynamic of promise in us that has a power to change other's lives all on its own. That promise is not about anything particular or an ability to control life but about an openness to others that wishes to embrace and celebrate their goodness, even in their loss. I experienced this most profoundly when Rose was born and I discovered she had Down syndrome. I think all parents have a slow journey into the realisation that their

child is not necessarily who they thought they would be or want them to be. My children are who they are almost regardless of what I want them to be. With Rose, this realisation came all at once. In responding to the call to responsibility I had to let go of all the ideas I had of a 'normal' life for her. Yet in doing so, it opened a horizon in which I could see her and see her as one that matters. This has brought a deep and rich openness to her and her future even though I do not know what that will be. It brought a dynamic of promise that is only experienced in relationship.

We have a model of how to bear this witness to others. We have a God that became man and showed us the way, witnessing our worth to us in being willing to bear the crucifixion in his own body. We have his own words that when we do something for the seemingly 'least' we do it for him. We also have a Church that shows us the way to witness through the corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. I would add to these, echoing Paul, to not leave your neighbour alone in the fragility of their joy but rejoice when they rejoice.

Much of the culture in the world speaks of autonomy, independence and self-actualisation. What I have discovered is that the deepest, richest and most enduring meaning is found in my ethical belonging to the other. In saying yes to bearing its witness. A witness that can change lives. At its deepest level this is what we do at Mass. We participate in and bear witness to the dignity of Christ's love for us made manifest in the crucifixion and resurrection. In consuming the Eucharist we become incorporated into that eternal witness of love made present in my life and body.