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THE COMPASSION QUEST

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Contents

To Sandra, Lukas and Lena

Piglet: 'How do you spell "love"?'
Pooh: 'You don't spell it. You feel it.'
A. A. Milne

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possible. Most of all, I met and married my beautiful wife Sandra and became a dad to two delightful children, Lukas and Lena, who have provided inspiration, love, and so much fun and laughter throughout the process of writing. Sandra herself is no stranger to both compassion and suffering, having been widowed at a young age, and so she has been able to give countless insightful suggestions on the text and has enthusiastically and tirelessly read drafts of the book. She has also been a rock of support and love. I owe her so much. I never realized that three people could bring me so much happiness and fulfilment. I thank God daily for bringing them into my life.

Prologue: finding our purpose

> Life is beautiful and worth living and meaningful. Despite everything.
>
> *Etty Hillesum, 12 months before her death in Auschwitz*

> May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.
>
> *Franciscan Benediction*

In Brian Selznick's novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, later adapted into the hit movie *Hugo* by director Martin Scorsese, the eponymous 12-year-old hero discusses the meaning of life with his friend Isabelle. Pondering the clockwork machines that he had painstakingly restored, he comes to the conclusion that all machines are created by humans for specific reasons. 'They are built to make you laugh, like the mouse here,' he says, as the couple watch a wind-up mouse skittle across the table, 'or to tell the time, like clocks, or to fill you with wonder.' He then admits that broken machines bring sadness to his heart, as they are not fulfilling the purpose of their creation. 'Maybe it's the same with people,' he concludes, 'if you lose your purpose, it's like you're broken.'

The secular world has developed a deep-seated fear of the Christian concept of 'sin', holding that it induces an unhealthy amount of individual guilt. Such criticism is not without validity, and, as a result, even my colleagues in the Church are rarely brave enough to tackle the subject directly in their sermons or teaching. The musings of Hugo Cabret, however, hint at something of what the Bible is referring to when it asserts that we are living in a 'sinful' world. After all, in many ways we are

alienated from our intended purpose. We live in a 'broken' world, which has lost its reason for being. But that, of course, is not the end of the story. Just as the orphan boy Hugo is brought hope and purpose through his young friend Isabelle, who is the first person for many years to show him compassion and love, it is in the quest for those very qualities, compassion and love, that all of us can find the reason for our existence.

In my last book, *Finding Hope and Meaning in Suffering*, I intended to show that hope and meaning can be found even in the midst of great adversity. Our greatest gift in facing our suffering is the present moment, which is where God resides. It is in the here and now that we are able to connect with the world in all its wonder and thus touch the divine. The transcendent dwells in life's details. He is present in the people we meet, in the beauty of nature, in the bliss of silence, in the comfort of our memories, and in the joy of laughter. In fact, we can find God in most of our seemingly ordinary and everyday experiences. 'Shut your mouth; open your eyes and ears,' writes C. S. Lewis; 'take in what there is and give no thought to what might have been there or what is somewhere else.'

This book is also about the present moment, but the emphasis is now widened. Not only do we appreciate that the here and now can bring meaning to our own lives, but we recognize, too, that our own present moments can bring light to the lives of others. We live in a society where achievements, wealth and success are, by and large, valued higher than altruistic actions. Responsibility for those suffering, for those in the throes of injustice and for environmental concerns is, therefore, sometimes overlooked, as individual endeavour and greed is, often unconsciously, championed. There are signs, however, that a new paradigm is emerging, where we are beginning to recognize that the cult of celebrity, the obsession of lust and the glorifying of power are false gods. In the words of T. S. Eliot, increasingly many of us no longer feel at ease 'in the old dispensation'. By

using the present moment to be present to each other, we can choose another way of living, as we stand alongside others who suffer and share willingly in their vulnerability, weakness and uncertainty. It is, after all, when we attune ourselves to love's frequency that the quest for meaning, purpose and strength can be fulfilled.

This fact became particularly clear to me during two periods of my life. First, a number of years ago, I underwent a period of intense pain and suffering. During that time I was diagnosed with a degenerative back condition and underwent spinal surgery. For almost a year I was restricted to lying down at home – alone, unable to work, and limited to only short, pain-filled walks each day. One morning, I struggled downstairs to answer my front door. On the step stood a 24-year-old man, whom I had only met once before in passing, at a funeral at which I had officiated. The young man announced that he had heard of my back injury and knew that I lived alone, so he was wondering whether he could help with any household chores. For the next six months, James came over to my house regularly, at least once a week, and would do my washing up, empty my bins, and do my grocery shopping for me. Outwardly, his altruism offered no real gain for this popular and trendy young man, who was training to be a lawyer. His assistance was not born out of a sense of duty and it was not done for any payment. Furthermore, he was not a churchgoer, so there was no outward religious incentive. Yet his visits did not simply bring help to me at a time of helplessness. I recall him later disclosing to me that he had no real idea what had inspired him to offer support, but in his little acts of compassionate kindness he had found a meaning that was beyond anything he was experiencing in his life of partying and studying.

The other event that helped bring me to a realization that meaning and purpose are forged through compassion occurred in my first year of ministering in a church in Cardiff. A member of my congregation asked me to visit her work colleague's father,

who had been diagnosed with a brain tumour. Over the next three months I visited Ray's bedside regularly, and my time with him had a profound effect on me. I would always walk in to a barrage of abuse about my beloved Swansea City football team, as he was a fan of our greatest rivals, Cardiff City! The rest of the time with him was spent chatting, debating, laughing and crying. During the last two weeks of his life I visited him daily, often simply to hold his hand and then to drink coffee with his struggling family. At his funeral, his grieving wife told me that my presence at his bedside had brought much comfort and hope to this non-church-attender. Yet, in my mind, the purpose and meaning that had been engendered had been mutual in a way I would never have imagined, and I was walking away from our short association having been deeply affected.

Compassion in the present moment can certainly bring a purpose and reason to a world that seems to struggle with locating significance. *Finding Hope and Meaning in Suffering*'s emphasis on the importance of discovering individual inner meaning rooted itself firmly in the biblical tradition, but it also laid its foundations in the Christian contemplative tradition. It particularly advocated two concepts that have been at the heart of contemplative Christianity down the centuries. The concept of *awareness* leads us to connect with the present moment in such a way that we can recognize it for what it truly is – a loving experience of the kingdom of God. Alongside this is the concept of *acceptance*, which, rather than being passive submission to hardships, is a transformative embracing of the reality of situations. There is, however, a third area that has underpinned much of the contemplative tradition down the ages, a concept that I left unexplored in my earlier book. This is *interconnectedness*, which values the mutual relationship between our inner being and the outside world.

The interconnectedness of God's creation was briefly touched upon in the chapters on 'Nature' and 'Helping others' in *Finding Hope and Meaning in Suffering*, but the concept was generally

sidelined, as the book was fundamentally inward-looking and centred on individual spirituality. This book attempts to redress the balance. Our spiritual journey, after all, must do more than merely assist us as individuals, lest it descend into a mere tool for self-help and positive thinking. Down the years, Christian spirituality has tended towards issues of our inner life, and, in recent years at least, even worship has become increasingly insular and me-focused. As a consequence, for many years Christians have been led away from a holistic reading of the Bible and theology. A truly biblical understanding of our spiritual life, however, relates to our whole existence, not least to our relationships with God, with each other, and with the rest of the created world. The US civil rights movement of the 1960s, for example, recognized the importance of such a holistic vision of spirituality. God was working through both personal and social dimensions of the civil rights leaders, and their personal relationships with God were inseparable from their tireless work for justice and reconciliation. Both dimensions complemented each other. Thus our personal spiritual lives are very much related to the social dimension of our lives. To separate our inward and outward journeys is to set up a false dichotomy. The two are inseparable parts of one experience, and we should never make rivals of soul and body, sacred and secular, spirit and flesh, or Church and world.

As such, any theological reflection on spirituality cannot ignore how imperative it is for us to give physicality to our inner lives. The words in any book on theology are as worthless as the paper they are written on if they remain merely black ink on the page. Our theology cannot remain incarcerated in academic textbooks or caged up in religious buildings. Karl Marx observed that philosophers tend to interpret the world, when they should be trying to change the world. Likewise, theology should not be about words, however useful they are for sharing ideas. Clarence Jordan warned of the consequences of incarcerating the Word (the *logos*) in intellectual pursuits:

> The Word became a sermon and was later expanded into a book and the book sold well and inspired other books until of the making of books there was no end. And the Word died in darkness and was buried in the theological library.

For the Word to thrive, theology should be not only about observing, but also about acting. In John's Gospel, Jesus' very first words are to a group of John the Baptist's disciples (John 1.35–39). 'What do you want?' he asks. The disciples respond, rather strangely, with another question: 'where are you staying?' Jesus answers with a simple invitation: 'Come and see.' Theology is about exactly that – looking and seeing, and then responding in action to what we have seen.

It was with this logic in mind that Hans Urs von Balthasar claimed that true theologians do not simply ruminate on doctrines, but rather they observe the life of Christ and then live out what they have seen. This is the only way, according to him, to true 'sainthood'. The fact that so many Christians before us have not lived out the theology they espoused is a stark warning to us all. German guards at Auschwitz would sometimes wear belt buckles on their uniforms that proclaimed 'God with us', then sit at home in the evenings listening to Bach's spiritual classics. Our theology and spirituality must never be something that is compartmentalized, kept away from our everyday routines. Rather, it must be integral to every part of our lives. As Etty Hillesum put it: 'I keep talking about God the whole day long, and it is high time that I lived accordingly.'

1

Faith and the universe

> Just as a circle embraces all that is within it, so does the Godhead embrace all. No one has the power to divide this circle.
>
> *Hildegard of Bingen, twelfth-century contemplative*

> Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.
>
> *Albert Einstein*

In Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, the main protagonist, Celie, a poor, uneducated black girl living in the Deep South of the United States in the 1930s, describes to a friend the God to which she was introduced at a very young age. 'He big and old and tall and greybearded and white,' she explains, 'you wear white robes and go barefooted.' This God was a distant, authoritarian figure, who had been used for centuries to justify the power that whites held over blacks and that men held over women. Celie admits that it was, therefore, easy for her to discard her outdated white, male deity. 'When I found out, I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest,' she confesses. This, however, was only the beginning of Celie's faith journey, and the novel describes her eventually laying aside her negative concept of God and moving towards a radically different, incarnational portrayal of the divine.

While very few Christians today would hold to a God who could be described as 'white' and a 'man', a theologically traditional view of God is still in ascendance. Yet in recent years the traditional image of God has found itself under vitriolic attack.

Writers such as Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens have certainly influenced the thoughts and beliefs of their readers, but more than this they reflect and affirm the already deeply held hostility of an increasingly atheistic society towards faith. Speaking about 'God' is regarded as being as nonsensical as speaking about Father Christmas or the tooth fairy. 'Fairies don't exist, because we don't see them. If we don't see things, they don't exist,' explained my five-year-old daughter. Dawkins' analogy of faith being akin to believing in a Flying Spaghetti Monster runs along a similar line of argument – believing in a God that we can't 'see', 'touch' or 'hear' is as ridiculous as believing in a fantastical creature. Dawkins' image has particularly been taken into the hearts of atheist and agnostic internet bloggers, one of whom famously adapted an image of Michelangelo's ceiling at the Sistine Chapel by replacing the Almighty with the Spaghetti Monster. One of his tentacles reaches out to touch Adam's finger, with the tagline 'Touched by his noodly appendage'.

Such criticism of the traditional image of God is now widespread in our society. Young people especially regard such a critique as supporting their world-view and culture, and many of their idols, from comedians like Ricky Gervais and Eddie Izzard to TV celebrities like Derren Brown and Stephen Fry, affirm their views. For us to counter such misunderstanding and prejudice about the Christian God, we ourselves must embark on a liberative faith journey like the one taken by Celie in *The Color Purple*. By undertaking such a quest, we must aim to develop our image of God to reach a way of viewing the divine, and a way of speaking about the divine, that can make sense to the post-modern, scientific mindset, but still holds on to a theologically sound and time-honoured foundation. After all, such joviality about the Flying Spaghetti Monster hides a serious issue that Christians have to face. Traditionally, the Christian concept of God has been unashamedly other-worldly, and to the unbelieving mindset a supernatural God is increasingly

seen as 'unbelievable'. At the foundation of this traditional, ethereal view of God, however, is not Christianity itself but rather the secular lens through which our faith has universally been read.

Casting off the Cartesian world-view

The first step in our journey of discovering an image of God that makes sense to an increasingly unbelieving world, then, is for us to recognize that certain philosophical and cultural movements in the past have been so pervasive in their influence on our faith that they have defined its very character. In its first few centuries, for example, Christianity found itself heavily influenced by Greek Platonic dualism, which differentiated starkly between the soul and the body. As a result of the influence of Platonism, Christian tradition has always reflected ambivalence towards physical matter. This is shown in our paradoxical attitude towards the body, which on the one hand is seen as the Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6.19–20), and on the other hand is regarded as an obstacle to full union with Christ (Galatians 5.13–18).

Eighteenth-century Cartesian thought served merely to maintain these beliefs. Rene Descartes' 'I think therefore I am' philosophy affirmed the reality of our 'thoughts' and 'emotions', while doubting the experiences of our bodily senses. The physical world, then, became separated and alienated from us, and we began to identify more with our minds rather than with our bodies or the natural world. Cartesianism contributed to the development of modern scientific practice and method, which further disconnected us from the world around us. With the development of science, our universe became a machine to be studied objectively and impersonally, with the natural world viewed as a collection of predictable smaller machines, made up of isolated atoms. Whether we are studying science in school or at a more advanced level, rarely do we connect emotionally

with what we study; rather, we distance ourselves from the world and view matter as a multiplicity of isolated and separated objects to be experimented upon. As Descartes himself asserted, 'I do not recognize any difference between the machines made by craftsmen and the various bodies that nature alone composes.'

Psychology, biology and the social sciences are all rooted in such a mechanistic view of the universe. Biology even uses the machine metaphor in its everyday vocabulary, employing phrases such as 'factories of cells', 'molecular machinery', 'assemblies of molecules' and 'DNA structures'. The human body itself has therefore been reduced to a machine, to be serviced occasionally and repaired by our doctors when faulty. Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian view of the future in his novel *Never Let Me Go*, later adapted into an award-winning film with Keira Knightley and Carey Mulligan, is a sobering reflection on the possible consequences of this view of the physical world, as it paints a picture of a society where organ donation has reduced bodies to being, quite literally, machines to be harvested for 'parts'.

Within the scientific and medical community, however, many challenge the view of our bodies as having purely mechanical value. In my role as chaplain of Cardiff University, I visit the Biomedical School annually to officiate at a service over the cadavers used by the students in their study. The School has a policy that aims to make its medical students aware of the fact that these cadavers were once healthy, living bodies, with thoughts, feelings and emotions. Each student is asked to write a poem reflecting on the gift that these people have given – they have literally given their bodies so that others, who will be treated by these students in the future, may live.

Such attempts to redress the balance are commendable, but the prevailing contemporary attitude to the universe is that we are part of a lifeless, mechanistic and ultimately disaffected place. The Cartesian world is a world of alienation between body and mind, between person and person, and between human and nature. As a consequence, even society itself has become a

machine to be studied by statistical models. Each one of us is a cog in this great machine, which the media and the advertising world are able to manipulate and influence. In the 2002 science-fiction film *Minority Report*, which sees Tom Cruise battling against the 'thought police', even the billboards on the roadside personalize the products that are advertised on them by scanning people's retinas as they walk past. And perhaps this unsettling vision of the future is not so distant a nightmare. Already our computers keep records of what we have bought and where we have been browsing on the internet; they will then, weeks or months later, advertise products similar to what we have earlier been perusing or purchasing. Advertisements for bikes for nine-year-old boys still appear on my computer, despite the fact that we have already bought a bike for my son and he is now 11 years old! In the cut-throat sphere of advertising, as elsewhere in our society, we are faced with an uncaring, controlling and competitive world, where there is little room for compassion, community and cooperation. Little wonder, then, that we live in a society of lonely, despairing and anxious souls.

God and the world

The prevalence of Platonism and Cartesianism in the history of the West has clearly had huge implications on present-day attitudes to the world around us. Thus our science, our politics and our economics all became unashamedly human-centred. For centuries, we insisted that humankind was quite literally at the centre of the universe, and scientists such as Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei were persecuted for suggesting that everything in our solar system revolves around the sun rather than around ourselves. While our science now recognizes that we are not so central to our universe, a general misplaced anthropocentricity continues to define our world-views. This has alienated us from nature and become a deeply ingrained

alienated from our intended purpose. We live in a 'broken' world, which has lost its reason for being. But that, of course, is not the end of the story. Just as the orphan boy Hugo is brought hope and purpose through his young friend Isabelle, who is the first person for many years to show him compassion and love, it is in the quest for those very qualities, compassion and love, that all of us can find the reason for our existence.

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