

Cultural Conversations

Evening event at the Bishop's Palace



Rowan Williams' address

I'm going to say a few words very briefly about what I understand the agenda of the next couple of days and the next couple of years to be. To say a little bit about how I'm thinking myself about how you define culture and what that might mean for a community like the community of this city. And I suppose one of the things that you have to say right at the beginning is that the word culture can produce cold shivers in some people.

I think it was some disagreeable character in Nazi Germany in the 1930s who said when I hear the word culture I reach for my revolver and I rather hope we can get beyond that stage of thinking about culture. Culture, as you might say, books and ballet, is not quite what we're talking about here. But if it's not that, what do we mean? The word itself, in its origins, has something to do with nurture and growth.

And that's where I'd like to start, really. Culture as nurture and growth. In that sense, you might say, if you want a model for culture, gardening is as good a model as any.

You're trying to provide the conditions in which, in this case, not just plants but people grow. And of course one of the things about growth is that you never quite know which direction it's going to go in. You don't quite know what's going to be risky, what's guaranteed to produce results and what isn't.

You have to try. Because one of the things about being human is that we're constantly, it seems, pressing against the boundaries of what we're taking for granted. If we just lived with what we took for granted, we would presumably still be trying to invent the wheel.

We don't take things for granted as human beings. We ask questions about ourselves and about our neighbours. We ask questions about that rather unusual kind of neighbour called the world around us.

And in reflecting on those questions and trying to find answers to those questions, we find our own humanity becomes more enriched, becomes fuller and more exploratory. We find more people to talk to. And in case you think that's just a matter of more and more conversation, remember it's only by talking to others that we discover more fully and humanely what we can do together.

It's often said that talking substitutes for action, especially with clergy. But the fact is, without talking, without exploring each other's boundaries a bit, we don't get to do things together. We need to understand the limits of the situation we're in.

And that of course tells us something about one of the most obvious things in any city like this, an obvious thing about our gathering tonight. Culture designates something of the history we bring with us. Local, ethnic, linguistic.

A culture in terms of a tradition. We don't simply take traditions for granted. We test them out in conversation, in relationship.

And keep discovering again and again what it is that we can actually do together, that we hadn't thought we could. But I think as you have gathered from the introduction, there's more to be said even than that. This business of culture as something to do with nourishment and growth is a reminder that the life of the imagination is not a luxury for human beings.

It's not that most people just trundle along solving problems as best they can and a few elect spirits have this sort of arty extra built onto them. All of us are finding out, day by day, year by year, what our limits are and what our possibilities are. And so bearing in mind that I started with culture as nurture and growth, the second big thing I'd like to drop into the pot is culture as what helps us to believe what is possible for us.

Culture shapes what's possible for us. And that's where the culture of the arts, the imagination, comes in. We discover in that context what is possible.

And it's frequently a lot more than we thought to start with. Once again, enrichment and enlargement. Growth is what we're talking about.

And the thing is, of course, that if you don't have an environment in a country or a city or any community, if you don't have an environment that encourages that life of culture and imagination, it's not so much that you're saying culture doesn't matter. You're creating another kind of culture. A culture which limits people's possibilities instead of elevating them.

So not investing in the life of the imagination, the life of the arts, isn't a neutral thing. You're actually creating another kind of culture and not a very promising one. A culture of stagnation, of boredom, of shrinkage.

Presented within those terms, not very many people would say they wanted to live in that kind of culture. But to live in other ways does require energy and investment. Practical, imaginative, visionary.

Of course, in the nature of the case, the life of culture depends on volunteers. It depends on people who love creating possibilities. I suppose that's one definition, isn't it, of an artist? Somebody who loves creating possibilities.

And that means you're never going to be able to deal with it all by statutory provision. We know that. But you can create a climate in which that is something taken seriously as a valid, exciting, positive contribution to the common life.

So those, I think, are the two clusters of ideas that I wanted just to throw in to get conversation going. Culture as nourishing, as helping to grow. Culture as shaping possibilities.

Doubtless, you have things to say, and we'll hear more about this tomorrow, I've heard of, things to say about what it means to transmit a culture to a rising generation. For many of us, that'll be involved with transmitting an inherited culture, once again, a tradition of one sort or another. But more generally, it's a matter, I think, of asking whether and how, in our philosophy and practice of education, we make room for this element of the imagination.

It's pushing beyond what we've been taking for granted. If I have a big worry about education these days, and I do, frankly, it is that it's not always very sensitive to that element of creating possibilities. There's a lot of emphasis, understandable enough, on certain kinds of rather narrowly defined accountability and lots of boxes to be ticked.

But a little bit of breathing space that allows for growth, a little bit of risk-taking in the life of mind and heart, I'd have thought was part of creating people who would go out and help to shape a nourishing, enlarging community and society around. I was trying to describe to Sugra earlier on this afternoon the remarkable tradition in Wales, my native land, of the nationalised telethon, which some of you may have heard of, the great annual cultural festival held in different places around Wales every year, where several thousand people, over a week, will gather in one spot in Wales usually in the rain, it's not Wales in August, and they will listen to music, lectures, poetry, concerts, ancient and modern, there will be adjudications of national competitions for prose writing and poetry writing and drama writing, there will be events for young people, there will be events for Welsh people who have gone abroad and had the good sense to come back again. There will be slightly bizarre ceremonies involving the so-called Gorsedd of Bards, a national group of cultural elite who have been honoured with membership of this strange society, and there will be a great deal of socialising, usually in the Welsh language, on the field.

Now, some people, in Wales and beyond, look with just a touch of mockery at this rather remarkable week, and there's plenty about it that is very funny and slightly absurd at times, only I am allowed to say that as I'm not sure that's what it is. But it does represent, and I hope I'm not just being sentimental about my own nation here, it does represent an economy that's been quite deep in Wales, in the last couple of hundred years particularly, a belief that there is something about a densely textured, a thickly woven cultural life that is good for politics and economics and for human well-being. It's not quite as true as it was perhaps 50 years ago, but I think for a lot of the 19th and 20th century, the very high levels of intelligent political activism in Wales had something to do with the sense of a deeply worthwhile cultural environment which was constantly reinforcing for people the message that what they thought and believed and imagined was worth it.

And when I think of the role of culture in the widest sense, I think of it a bit in those terms. Reinforcing people's sense of the worthwhileness of their perspectives. And also, and I think this is no small thing, reinforcing the idea that community as a whole has to be very deeply concerned about and invested in the well-being of its members.

Culture, to put it very bluntly, has a great deal more to do with mental health than some people might imagine. And once again, creating a culture in which expectations are depressed and imagination is not encouraged is not a recipe for, in any sense, a healthy community physically, mentally, or spiritually. And so the very last thing I want to say is it's

got something to do with the colour that I wear, as well as this audience wear, but the spiritual.

Just as culture itself is not some sub-department of human life, but that element of every bit of our common life that pushes the boundaries of responsibilities, so I would say is the spiritual. The spirit, the human spirit, is not one department of human experience. It is that particular kind of depth and energy in human experience of action that opens up horizons we had not dreamt of.

Myself, as a traditional religious believer, that has everything to do with the grace of God at the end of the day. Some of you in this audience will be committed to that and some of you won't. But I'd like to think that all of you could recognise something in that of what makes human beings work with hope, with trust, with confidence, with imagination.

Because at the end of the day, that is what we're about in talking about the cultural life of a community, a city, about a cultural renaissance, a cultural programme of renewal and extension. It's not, going back to where I started, it's not about more ballet. Though, you know, nothing against ballet, I pay some demand.

It is about what it is that keeps the horizons open, keeps the energy pressing against the boundaries of what we take for granted, increases and deepens the sense of what is possible. And from what I'm hearing from people here, that's why we're here tonight, asking the question about how we make more things possible for this community and its people. And how in making more things possible, we deepen and reinforce the mental and spiritual health of individuals and communities in a way that will keep this community and its neighbours creative, constructive.

And, this is no small thing, also peaceful, in the most positive sense. Not peaceful in the sense of there being no conflicts and tensions, but peaceful in the sense of living with an active, long-term mutual respect and enjoyment, an appreciation of the richness of others. It is one of the hopes of the last century who said that peace is the fruit of solidarity.

Good phrase, I think. Peace is the fruit of solidarity. And solidarity is about building culture together.

