**Tony and Barbara Holden: ‘Critical loyalty and Christian faithfulness’**

[1] What we owe each other.

Christians emphasize fellowship; our responsibilities to each other; and service and compassion towards others. Many of us have been and are especially concerned for ‘the poor and disadvantaged’ in all their circumstances and needs.

​This Christian faithfulness reminded us of a book-title: ‘What we owe each other – a new social contract’ [Note a]. The book is about constructing a new agreement between citizens and Government that takes account of both individual and collective responsibility.

​It got us into talking about what it is that we ‘owe each other:’ as family; church; neighbourhoods; and for ourselves.

​The idea we want to share lies alongside that of Christian faithfulness: and it is that we owe ourselves and each other ‘a critical loyalty.’

​[2] Critical loyalty as a life-style choice.

◙ People who demand unconditional loyalty to themselves or their power-base tend to be authoritarian, controlling and all too often guilty of abuse.

​◙ People who claim that loyalty to their tribe is absolute – however that tribe in described – usually get into regarding themselves as superior [narcissism] and arm themselves, first defensively, and then by attacking and demonising their enemies [note b].

​◙ People who insist we can only have one loyalty within our own personality and character – [only be one sort of person] - misjudge the depth, complexity and richness of human personality and human cultures. This is true ‘regardless of race, gender, religion, class or ethnicity.’ Surely one key factor in our Christian view of human fulfilment is that we value the many aspects that make up our own development, lives, maturity [or as some would say our Christian holiness].

​◙ So, we see ‘critical loyalty’ as a positive strategy; as a force for good; as a a ‘gate’ that allows us to cross many barriers and divides. For some people it means joining causes and being committed to campaigns and movements. For others [in extreme] to non-violent action that ends in prison and torture.

​◙ For us – as Christians - it means we value cultural difference in itself. We can cherish the people we know and share our lives with people who are different to us. We can live lives that are ‘good enough’ [note c] rather than seeking ‘impossible absolutes or all-consuming purity.’ We can sustain lives that are nourished as we work at our critical loyalties.

​◙ Notes – [a] Minouche Shafik ‘What we owe each other – a new social contract’ 2021: she is an economist, director of London School of Economics and crossbench peer. [b] Elif Shafak 'How to stay sane in an age of division’ 2020 Wellcome Collection: 90 pages. [c] “The phrase ‘good enough mother’ was first coined in 1953 by Donald Winnicott, a British paediatrician and psychoanalyst.”

**Tony Holden ‘Suffering, joy and struggle’**

I started on this article when I realized how many e-mails I’d written to people I care about who are very ill or bereaved. I also started because our own family has been coping with long-covid and illness, but not thankfully death.

Of course, in many countries the death-toll is almost always frighteningly high. They are hit, all too often, by the effects of disasters, weather change, poverty, and wars.

We in the UK, prior to covid-19, haven’t been used to statistics about death on news time TV. I’m not sure that ‘death’ was ever a taboo subject, as some suggest. What is clear is that in the UK covid-19 is making conversations about illness and dying commonplace - on TV, between friends, within families, perhaps especially among the ‘over 80’s’ [with our first vaccine jabs]!

I would say “life is most assuredly grounded [predicated] in the fact of dying.” I’m reminded of George Santayana’s words [1863-1952]:

“There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval.”

But I feel strongly that the human situation and our Christian way of living demand much more than the word ‘interval.’ For me it is summed up in my phrase: “Human life is to do with suffering, joy and struggle.”

I want to share three ways of viewing this idea: I hope they encourage you.

**[1] Jesus’ passion is an example of ‘suffering, joy and struggle’ -** from within our Christian traditions and teaching you can see that ‘suffering, joy and struggle’ are enacted [for example] in the Lenten journey. In the Passion narrative of the Jesus of the Gospels. In the Way of the Cross. In, as some would have it, our ‘imitation of Christ.’ They are made human [incarnated] in Jesus.

**[2]** **‘Suffering, joy and struggle’ show that human life is ambiguous, complex, mysterious, and fun.** More I would say than the word ‘interval’ suggests. The best hope we have of meaning and purpose; of worthwhile relationships; of joining in non-violent actions that seek justice and the common-good – is to use all three. No doubt you will have your own choice of words [as variants to ‘suffering, joy and struggle’]. The difficult but creative approach is to affirm and work with all three of them.

**[3] ‘Suffering, joy and struggle’ are best-faced through co-operation not conflict –** The pandemic has led to massive cooperation– not least through scientific research and the NHS. But it is also true that it is exposing human structures, institutions, groups and individuals at their most unjust and exploitative. Co-operation is often hard won. But if our aim is to treat all people as of worth, as ‘grievable,’ as family then cooperation is the way forward. I recall words of my ex-colleague and friend Colin Marchant:

∆ “Every single human being matters, especially those who are poor and disadvantaged, those who others regard as not important. You get the valuing of each person and all people from the Jesus of the Gospels. Indeed, this is the centre of the Gospel, the love of God for you [Rev Dr Colin Marchant and Judith Marchant].”

**Tony and Barbara Holden ‘Being connected.’**

Methodists spell it ‘the Connexion.’ ‘Inspiring stories from the life of your Methodist Church’ – as the magazine has it.

When one or more of the IT links with the outside world ‘crashes’ we shout for help and then realize very quickly what being unconnected to those we care about, even by screen, means to us.

We’ve become especially aware, during these difficult covid-19 days, of another circle of friends. We recognise them as being in one or other of our ‘communities of interest’. These include for us music, gardening, art, politics, books and church.

We realise that using the term ‘community of interest’ of the church might sound a bit lightweight when usually we use terms like ‘God’s mission’ or ‘discipleship’. But that’s the difference between ‘internal’ valued language and commonly used [and valued] language.

Then there are the people we meet through our screen-links with the world. In one sense there is the ever-changing fact that there are some 7.8 billion of them. And there is an even more demanding fact that sometimes we see/hear one person expressing their acute need in such a way that we cannot bear to watch and turn away. And then sometimes we find our own condition [age, disability, gender inequality] being shown to us afresh. And, there are those who remain ‘voiceless:’ this is so for many near us, for many in the UK, for a great many around the world.

Elif Shafak is “an award winning British-Turkish novelist and writer.” We’ve been reading: ‘How to stay sane in an age of division’ [2020]. She writes:

* “[And there are] a lot of voiceless people. And the biggest irony is that all this is happening at a time when we as humans - regardless of race, gender, religion, class or ethnicity – are supposed to be more connected and empathetic [sympathetic] and free than ever before.”

Marshall McLuhan gave us the phrase ‘the global village’ [1964]. So, as we struggle to get through the threats and limitations of covid-19 how can we encourage each other to be connected but not overwhelmed?

[1] We can work within our own devotions at our Christian-values - at that way of life that for us comes from the Jesus of the Gospels [throughout the Gospels and notable in many New Testament passages such as I Corinthians,13].

[2] We can join in ‘public discourse’ and thereby join with [show solidarity with some would say] many beyond the Christian Church. We need to argue and demonstrate that ‘being good,’ ‘seeking to be compassionate and loving,’ ‘working for justice and peace’ is hugely and significantly different to being harmful, abusive, oppressive, unjust or violent. Attempts to blur these distinctions – especially to promote lying over truth-telling - will not do.

[3] Thirdly, and no doubt there are many more, we can continue to be in contact with each other at LMC – and thereby be a blessing to each other.

**Tony Holden – Astonishment and faith**

We are very fortunate at Loughton Methodist Church [LMC] to have a range of voices, emphases, Christian-traditions, and personal witness. Such hopefully meet the many different needs of our members and community. Some of whom [like us] have been Christians and in the Church for a long time. Some of whom are potential or new Christians. Some [I would guess] are lapsed Christians.

So, this is written from my experience as being ‘secular and Christian’ [note the ‘and’!].

All of which leads me to my 80th birthday! Out of the many presents and much cake I received I was also given an Iris Murdoch book on philosophy and ethics [1999]. I will spare you the 520 pages, but I do want to use two-lines she quotes:

► “[Humans] feel the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists [Ludwig Wittgenstein].”

I want to think and write about ‘astonishment and faith’ – at a time when much in our lives is difficult and hard-going and hard to fathom.

[1] For some people [for me] I think “the astonishment that anything at all exists” is a positive and reassuring idea and emotion. There is ‘astonishment’ rather than ‘wonder,’ or ‘disappointment’ or, in this instance, ‘belief.’

[2] We are also astonished at stories to do with origins, creation, ‘final explanations.’ It’s sometimes said that “children can’t think of their parents having sex.” Well, knowing that your own birth and birthing comes from sex between your parents is a realistic way of acknowledging your own origin. It is the start of your unique life-story. Thereafter, the particularity of our DNA, development, mother-tongue, family and culture are writ-large throughout our lives.

[3] I recall many years ago a close friend saying to me – at a time of sudden and violent bereavement – “do you think there is life after death?” And, because I cared greatly for that person, I found myself adding to my expression of Christian faith the words: “it seems as likely as that we are alive now.”

[4] Given some of the pressures of contemporary living I want to exclaim and explain: “I am not a number, I am not a robot, I am not a screen – I am a human being.” And moreover – as Barbara and I say so often – we are all human beings ‘living with difference.’

[5] And here’s the rub. What does it mean for me to “run up against the limits of [this] language?” How does facing up to this ‘astonishment’ bless and transform our lives? How might we make it part of our faith? Well -

* It takes us through the difficulties and complexities of being human on planet earth to our best explorations of facts and values.
* It encourages us to be open and questioning – not least of ourselves.
* It suggests that people flourish more from community and humility than from ideas of superiority or acts of oppression and violence.
* So, what do you think?