An Open-Pastoral-Letter-Homily for Our Member-Students of the House

Dear Friends,

I don’t usually write sermons or homilies in the form of letters. Even when I preach for undergraduates. But this is not your normal season. And I think you’ll understand that this is an unusual time, and so many of our usual customs don’t apply right now.

Where do we start? I guess it is something of an understatement to say that things are not exactly going according to plan. You expected to be back at the House next term, and enjoying the early summer sun of Oxford. Or enduring exams. Or a mixture of the two. I, like many of my colleagues, expected to be doing some teaching, administration and more besides. But nobody expected that distancing ourselves from one another would be the primary duty of our social life right now.

And yet, here we are. This is a loss – pure and simple. There is no point in pretending otherwise. And as we all know, there is more loss to come. Even for older people like me (I’m 57), I know we are likely to see illness and even death on a scale that few, if any of us, have ever witnessed before.

Loss may be the defining theme of 2020. People around us, and people we know, losing their jobs and livelihoods. If they have not lost them already. The distancing does not help us, either. Because it will lead to increased feelings of loneliness, and many of us already felt lonely. Only a matter of weeks ago we could not have foreseen this. And we have only seen the beginning of the losses that are to come.

There is no upside to this, but as with most things in life that we face, there is a lesson. Naturally, it is not the kind of lesson that anyone can merely teach to someone else, as if it were a matter of having the right information. No, this is a lesson that must be absorbed. The lesson is that life, in the end, is partly about loss; and even suffering itself can be the teacher.

You may think this is a bit bleak. I don’t think so. Many people experience significant suffering in their lives. Some of our junior members are already well-seasoned in this too, and they show remarkable cheerful resilience and greet humanity; maturity and fortitude beyond any reasonable expectation.

However, some suffering changes us forever. It creates, if you like, “the new normal”. This can be the death of a parent or sibling, the pain and stigma of abuse, or the affliction of an illness. Most of us are spared these things. The loss we face in bereavement does not usually come until we are older.
But there is now a new normal – a pandemic where none are immune. It is likely that every one of us, in every community, will feel or witness this loss close up. One lesson we learn in life is that it is partly about loss; that grief is one tax we have to pay for love. I know that might sound both fatalistic and even perhaps a little pessimistic, but I don’t think it is. Instead, it is honest and potentially freeing. But how so?

Being very partial to poetry, let me share, if I may, Mary Oliver’s short-pithy poem, ‘The Uses of Sorrow’:

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

We sometimes labour under the assumption that progress is inevitable, and things will only get better. Whatever is lost will be recouped. Others are under no such illusion. For progress is not inevitable – and not everything gets better.

For many of us, it starts inside us. We get older. Slower. Maybe wiser, but maybe less quick. Our friendships weather – but not always well. Parents get older and need our care; at precisely the same time some of us are raising children, who also need our care. We lose the luxury being carefree. We lose free time.

That may sound a bit grim – even depressing – so how is it freeing? Like this. It is truly liberating if we can learn to accept that our lives are on loan, and that we are meant to share and give our lives over to others. That is the kind of lesson we are often taught when we are younger, though it often sits within us as a kind of a “noble idea” or even an optional virtue to toy with, depending on our mood.

But many of the things that mark us, or even scar us a little in adult life, show us that the idea of our life being on loan is actually a high, rich and rewarding outlook. It can govern our bodies and our relationships; our charity and love; our vocations and professions; our fears and hopes; what to receive, and what to give.

We have probably always known – at least notionally – that we are limited, fallible and imperfect. As much as we might be boundless, clever and good. But life is a teacher and reality a supporting tutor. To be human is to be vulnerable. To be a better human is to help others with their vulnerability and to be honest about our own. Right now, I’m figuring we all feel pretty vulnerable, or know we soon will. To be sure, I know we cannot talk about this pandemic as some kind of “gift”, but perhaps there is an element of gift in this one fact: we are all, at the same time, being confronted with our individual and collective vulnerability. We cannot control it all.
Years ago, I remember reading these unsettling opening paragraphs in Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Dependent Rational Animals*. Just now, these words from Macintyre’s seem to be prescient in a new way:

> We human beings are vulnerable to many kinds of affliction and most of us are at some time afflicted by serious ills. How we cope is only in small part up to us. It is most often to others that we owe our survival, let alone our flourishing, as we encounter bodily illness and injury, inadequate nutrition, mental defect and disturbance, and human aggression and neglect. This dependence on particular others for protection and sustenance is most obvious in early childhood and in old age. But between these first and last stages our lives are characteristically marked by longer or shorter periods of injury, illness or other disablement, and some among us are disabled for their entire lives.

And when the ill, the injured and the otherwise disabled are presented in the pages of moral philosophy books, you might be forgiven for thinking this is about others. But in truth we are all vulnerable, in some ways dis-abled, and of course dependent. At times, our dependency is not so pronounced, and so we see ourselves as the potentially benevolent moral agents – rational, capable, secure. Our assumed independence is forgetfulness about our dependence, and the false promises and hopes of our “unending independence”.

The irony of adulthood is that it is precisely when we reach the point where it seems like our independence will have been maximized, we are reminded of our dependence – both from within our own bodies, and from the world around us. That is “the gift” of this time, hard though this is to say. A truth is being told – we are all vulnerable and dependent, and far more is contingent than certain.

Life, I think, is not always about making the future we want, and creating entirely new worlds of possibility for ourselves. Sometimes it is about responding to loss and pain with virtue, charity and love – and facing the present and future with humility, integrity, truthfulness and courage.

We find ourselves in a strange season right now; difficult and demanding times. It is not a moment in history any of us expected, nor is it a challenge any of us would have asked for. But it is our time. Here, right now. And it will be a time that is to be tempered with a great deal of loss.

How, then, shall we live? And how shall we respond? So, here is my advice: be truthful, be humble and be attentive.
Let me start with truth. It’s more important than you think: truth it is not easy. It is about realism and honesty. It is not just about avoiding a lie, or spinning a phrase that misleads, but maybe does not technically fib. Truth means this. Accept our losses as losses; but still find a way to give. I know that this might sound odd, and even completely counter-intuitive, because our basic instincts drive us towards recouping our losses. That is why the gift of this season is so strange and even alien. Our time now invites to recognise that we are vulnerable and dependent people. And in that, we may discover the powers of charity, consolation and cherishing. Maybe our “new normal” will build on the lesson of loss that suffering brings now, where we feel in a way we have not before: that each of us is ultimately dependent, and we are responsible for one another.

What of humility? Recent research from Harvard Business School – a famous study and essay, in fact from Jim Collins at the turn of the 21st century – found that many of the top organisations and institutions in the world were led by humble people. These were people that Collins identified as “Level Five Leaders” - and there are very few of them, and there is no higher level. They possess “humility and fierce resolve”, because humility is multi-dimensional and includes self-understanding, awareness, openness, passion and perspective. He continues,

“the most powerfully transformative executives possess a paradoxical mixture of personal humility and professional will. They are timid and ferocious. Shy and fearless. They are rare – and unstoppable”.

Collins never set out to study humble leaders. His study was the usual business school fare: how a good company might become great. But what he found was that these companies were developed by modest and wilful people, who had low ego needs, and could often come across as shy, peaceable and quiet. But they were also deeply resolved and highly resilient. They were not especially charismatic. They were more inclined to give praise to others, and be quite self-effacing. Such leaders might say, “it’s not about me, but it is about we...”.

Their humility meant that that did not need much external validation. They tended to inspire with their concern for the small details of other people’s lives. They tended to look only in the mirror for critical self-reflection, but otherwise looked out of windows. Leaders who were the opposite spent a lot of time in front of mirrors, and rarely glanced through the proverbial window. In this time of “social distancing”, now is the moment to be looking outwards and inwards, and asking, how can I help my neighbour, serve society, and contribute to the common good? In a word, attend.

Now, attentiveness is not just sitting up and taking notice. It is a profound re-centering of ourselves, and it requires us to pay detailed attention to that which others may not see or value. Attentiveness has an inner spirituality, fundamental to our humanity.
Attentive love is rooted in humility: stooping to care for the small details and concerns of other people’s lives matters. That’s why I like this poem by UA Fanthorpe, called, ‘Atlas’ (taken from Safe as Houses, Peterloo Poets, 1995):

There is a kind of love called maintenance
Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it;

Which checks the insurance, and doesn’t forget
The milkman; which remembers to plant bulbs;

Which answers letters; which knows the way
The money goes; which deals with dentists

And Road Fund Tax and meeting trains,
And postcards to the lonely; which upholds

The permanently rickety elaborate
Structures of living, which is Atlas.

And maintenance is the sensible side of love,
Which knows what time and weather are doing
To my brickwork; insulates my faulty wiring;
Laughs at my dry-rotten jokes; remembers
My need for gloss and grouting; which keeps
My suspect edifice upright in air,
As Atlas did the sky.

The lesson could not be clearer. We are asked to be less self-righteous, self-satisfied and self-sufficient – and become more self-aware. Notice what and who is around you. So like Atlas, do what you can to hold up the skies and those around you. Don’t expect to be thanked for it, or even perhaps acknowledged. Humble yourself. Be kind, attentive, truthful merciful…and forgiving.

In that rather schmaltzy film with Hugh Grant, Love Actually. Here’s what he says at the start:

‘Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion is starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don’t see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often it’s not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it’s always there - fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge – they were all messages of love...’.
There is a difference crucial between optimism and hope. Living in optimism has little capacity to deal with loss. But hope sees loss, damage and even death as something that has the capacity to bring to birth new forms of life. Hope is the best of things, I think. We cannot live without hope. But hope has to be true and real. False hope is the worst of all worlds to be living in. True hope has courage. It knows that we are not complete, and that we need each other. It knows that hope is not just what we live for. It is how we live as humans – as individuals and as communities. We are asked to be, whether together or apart, scattered of gathered, constantly renewed: communities and persons of character and intentional virtue. Becoming this is all. Everything else is secondary.

Let me conclude. There is a story about a Rabbi who was asked to comment on the book of Genesis. The rabbi paused, and noted that God had taken six days to make the heavens, the earth, and all living creatures. After each act of creation, whether it was the light, land, oceans, plants, or any of the animals, God had pronounced them to be good. But on the sixth day, after God had created man and woman, the pronouncement of ‘good’ from God is conspicuously withheld. The rabbi cautioned his audience against concluding that humanity is not good. Instead, the rabbi noted that the term ‘good’ is actually a misleading translation of the original Hebrew word, tov. Tov simply means ‘complete’, ‘finished’ or ‘sufficient’. And to complete his commentary, the rabbi added, you have to remember that humanity is not tov; we are still work in progress – incomplete.

Let us not forget that love, truth, attentiveness and humility all need to flourish in our world. You are the vessels for this. The call in this difficult and demanding time is to take off the frayed, light cloak of invulnerability and live together in truth, with humility and attentiveness towards one another. That is, after all, what your time here at the House, and at Oxford, is supposed to be all about. If our time now – with all the challenge that losses will surely bring – can lead to a future in which love and truth are stronger in us all, then this season will not be in vain, and our time not wasted. The falling tears of our losses can become the seeds of new gains.

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