
Here I Stand: With God

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My remarks come in three parts. I'm going to begin by reflecting on what it's like for all of us to face our mortality. For all our passion about who wins an athletic contest or fixation on getting a job we've applied for, in the end the overwhelming challenge of our lives is how we live in the face of the fact we're going to die. Then second, I'm going to identify what I discern to be the constituents of a life we can live in the face of our mortality. Then third I'm going to try to draw together the first set of insights with the second set and articulate the convictions around which I base my life. In conclusion I will try to distil all of the above into a sentence or two.

Significance in the Face of Mortality

So I begin with our mortality. Probably all of us have stood by a graveside or otherwise contemplated the loss of a person we cherished and cannot imagine being without. And I'm sure every one of us has looked down the tunnel of our own death, and wondered, 'What will become of me?' – both 'What if anything will be my future?', and 'What will become of all my thoughts and deeds my whole life long?'

What we're pondering, about a close companion or ourselves, is the question of significance. What will last, when the tide of time and mortality sweeps all away? I'm going to outline one possible approach to finding significance and then consider four alternatives.

The simple approach I'll call *humility*. 'How,' I think, 'can I have any significance in a universe of a hundred million galaxies, where each galaxy has a hundred million stars? I am unimaginably small, and the possibility of my having any true significance is denial and fantasy. I shall just try to plough my little furrow and find a little happiness, live peaceably with my neighbours and maybe leave the world a little better than I found it.' It sounds a simple ethic, but it's not a place many people can remain a whole lifetime. Humankind has within it an urge to seek, to strive, to yearn, to dream for something more. Mere humility can be a sign of deep contentment, but can also be a counsel of despair and resignation, like going down with the ship

without even trying out one of the lifeboats. Our search for survival and our need to matter requires us to tend in one of the subsequent four directions.

The first of which I'll call *hustle*. For some people, life is inherently competitive, and you need to get your elbows out to survive and thrive. You have to be crafty, to learn a few skills to get ahead of others, and to suppress any pangs of conscience that might slow you down. There's no use speculating on how or why we came to be here: life is a game, and the stopwatch has already started, so best grab and seize and snatch and grasp so you can consume and acquire and control and collect and thus diminish your vulnerability and enhance your security. Hustle believes life is fundamentally constituted by desire, and the secret is to discover and implement techniques for attaining the object of desire more successfully than others, in a universe essentially constituted by competition. Something like this lies behind every workaholic, overfunctioner or overachiever, each of whom thinks that idleness is the path to doom, yet success is attainable if only they try hard enough.

A more sophisticated alternative I'll call *honour*. Honour is where you say, 'I can't comprehend the magnitude of what existence entails, so I'm going to hold on to just a few things that will come over time to constitute my identity.' Perhaps a spouse, maybe children, possibly my country, especially if its integrity is at stake, maybe a cause close to my experience, like helping people who face motor neurone disease or raising money for leukaemia research: things I'm happy to wear on my sleeve and fight for. That's where I find significance. Honour believes life may be driven by impersonal forces like physics and economics, but to make life human means holding tight to certain things as long as possible until time and mortality eventually prise them from your grasp.

A third approach I'll call *heritage*. This recognises that there isn't a question we face in life that others haven't faced countless times before, and thus that it might be an idea to spend time seriously ingesting the best wisdom available and inhabiting a tradition with time-honoured validity. Yes, we might find ourselves sometimes in tension with it, and yes it does require us to set aside the impulse to find out everything for ourselves, but while our forebears didn't know everything, it's idle to say the human search for truth only began when I showed up. Heritage believes that the sum total of human creativity and earth's fecundity constitute an object of wonder from which we can spend a

lifetime simply learning. The meaning lies in the whole, rather than a single nugget of truth.

The last form of the search for significance we could call the *Homeric*. This sees each of us as solitary individuals, pursuing a lone quest for meaning and truth in an indifferent and sometimes hostile world. Life is an odyssey, in which the ship of our existence puts in at various harbours, geographical, professional, emotional and psychological, and we put together our own significance as a patchwork of memories, dreams and reflections. The Homeric quest believes life is a perpetual journey and the discovery is that the wisdom gained en route proves more significant than any destination.

While I share the intense desire for existence in general and my life in particular to have significance, and I see the appeal of all of these ways of seeking it, I want to identify some things they all lack, which I believe are essential to any true significance. What is implicit in humility and shows up slightly in the heritage approach, but not elsewhere, is the truth that the story of everything doesn't have me as the main character. The first step to finding significance is to decentre yourself from the story. Our significance is not in the way all other things in the universe amplify the wondrous splendour of ourselves. It lies in finding our place in a story. What is hinted at in honour but absent in the other approaches is that the true quality of existence lies in relationship – not just, as in heritage, our relationship with those who can inform, educate and entertain us, but in finding relationship that has no extraneous value and is valid simply for the relationship itself. Meanwhile significance is not something you chisel out like a sculptor creating a statue. Significance is something that's bestowed. It's like belonging: you can't achieve it: it has to be given and gradually discovered. And the last thing the conventional approaches to finding significance don't tend to grasp is that we find meaning and truth in story. Story is the way we order a sequence of otherwise incoherent and unconnected insights, characters and events into a plausible and compelling whole.

So rather than pursue the path of humility, hustle, honour, heritage or Homeric quest, I have found significance in these four insights: significance is not achieved but bestowed; significance is fundamentally found in relationship; relationship is characterised by story; and the way to understand story is to begin by recognising the story is not fundamentally about me. All of these crystallise in the notion of belonging. Thus belonging can't be achieved or earned; it is always a gift, a sense of being offered

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solidarity where there could easily or has previously been isolation. Belonging is always about relationship, about a pattern of interactions that transcend the instrumental and become valid for their own sake. Belonging is invariably understood in terms of story, a story of exclusion or ostracism turning into one of mutuality, acceptance, and embrace. And belonging is always about finding a truth deeper than one can embody alone, a truth that lies beyond, a truth more mystical than merely rational, a truth that however close you draw to it you still in some sense behold and cannot quantify.

These four features of belonging, you may already have noticed, all have rather familiar Christian names. The first, that it's all gift, is conventionally called grace. The second, that it's all about relationship, is customarily called love. The third, that relationship finds its character in the form of story, is called hope. And the fourth, that the story isn't one fundamentally about us, but is centred elsewhere, in one who graciously incorporates us regardless of our desiring or deserving – that final feature is called faith. By naming grace together with faith, hope and love, I've brought our search for significance into the realm of Christianity, but perhaps not from a conventional route. I want to continue in this trajectory and see how these four features work together to constitute a place, to use the words of our lecture series, we might stand.

Seven Steps to Where I Stand

I'm going to take you on a journey of seven steps by which I suggest we may arrive at a healthy combination of humility, hustle, honour, heritage and Homeric quest, all reshaped by faith, hope, love and grace.

So to step one. I'm going to start with the nature of all things. Here we have three choices. We can say, as some astrophysicists do, that there's only one reality, that there's no need for an external cause for the Big Bang, that existence began in a massive explosion and will one day cease in a big crunch, and that time and space are so causally connected that in the end there's no difference between them. That's choice one. Choice two is that there are two realities. There's something called essence, which lasts forever, and there's something called existence, which lasts for a limited time. There was no need for there ever to be existence, and this the fact of existence is the original mystery, miracle, marvel that stands at the pinnacle of all awesome discoveries. See how choice two decentres existence and dismantles the self-

importance of our lives. Existence itself, the foundation of all we think we know, is itself contingent on something beyond, something more central, something more permanent. That's choice two. Choice three is that this universe is only one of a number of universes, and thus that there's multiple existences. That's a mind-boggling notion, whether those multiple existences are eight or eight billion. But from the perspective of choice two, it's still very limited. Because when choice two talks of essence, essence isn't just a parallel existence, or even eight million such alternative existences. Essence is utterly different in quality from existence, and infinitely more textured and complex. A good way to get a glimpse of the glory of essence is that it's indescribably more wondrous than a million universes.

You can see why, given this threefold choice between the singularity of a self-contained existence, the duality of an existence that issues out of essence, and the multiplicity of many existences, I take my stand on the ground of the duality of existence and essence. This seems to me the only explanation for this world, this universe being so much, yet not everything. It's not territory any but the boldest astrophysicist would venture into, because physics by definition studies existence and has no judgement on essence. Which is why I don't find reading books about astrophysics threatening, to the extent that I understand them: because they're not talking about what I'm thinking about; space and time have little or nothing to do with eternity. So here's my first platform: there is existence and beyond existence there is essence. Here I stand.

Now to the second step. What is essence? Let's go back to my four insights. First, significance is not achieved but bestowed. That begs the question, who does the bestowing? Second, significance is fundamentally found in relationship. I'm going to pause there and come back to the other two in a moment. Essence is relationship. That's another choice point. It seems to me it's one of the most distinctive elements of Christianity: Islam and Judaism understand the notion of divine-human relationship. But Christianity maintains that essence, or that which lasts forever, or God as we most often say, is inherently relationship. The language Christianity uses for this is Trinity. God is three persons in utter and dynamic relationship. That's the heart of it all. That's the epicentre of everything, the epitome of truth. The choices are again three: option one, essence is impersonal, mechanical, a physical chemical reaction but no more; option two, essence is personal and purposive; option three, essence is inherently relational not just externally

but internally – God is a Trinity of persons, equal, interactive, effervescent. You'll see how option three is indescribably more awesome and wondrous than the other two options. Here we see the fundamental heart of Christianity: God, who is utter relationship, overflows from that relationship into seeking a relationship beyond, a relationship with a partner, an enormous plenitude of partners. It's often said that Judaism, Islam and Christianity believe in the same God. Well, that's of course true, if you're saying that there's a difference between essence that last forever and existence that doesn't, and that God is about essence and we're about existence. But the Christian understanding of God is that relationship isn't a second step for God, but absolutely what God is. The Trinity isn't a person that chooses to pursue relationship: the Trinity is relationship itself. Which means in our lives in existence, relationship isn't a route to a destination of something more useful, valuable or tangible. Relationship is that destination. So here is my second platform: God is relationship and seeks relationship. Here I stand.

And so to the third step. What does it entail for God to seek relationship? It entails two things. The first is that God must be so shaped as to be in external relationship. This is a great mystery: was God, utterly fulfilled in inner-Trinitarian dynamics, moved in some way to be altered to make relationship elsewhere? Or was that, from all eternity, always God's shape and inclination? Whatever the answer to that question, the name we give to the shape God takes to be in external relationship is incarnation. Incarnation means God being completely God, but also being completely human. It means something Genesis doesn't fully say and Darwin doesn't allow for: that God being with us in Christ was the reason for existence in the first place. Humanity came about not simply as a result of evolution or as a consequence of God wanting a companion. Humankind exists so God could be incarnate. The second thing entailed in God's pursuit of relationship is the need for a setting for that relationship. The name of that setting is creation. Creation comes about as the setting for the incarnation. So here is my third platform: God is relationship and seeks relationship. Creation owes its existence not simply to the big bang, as for astrophysics, or evolution, as for Darwin, or simply to God's creative impulse, as for Genesis, but as the theatre in which God would become one like us and dwell with us. That is the purpose behind existence. Here I stand.

Now to the fourth step. Where is existence going? I said earlier that it's in the definition of existence that it doesn't last forever. It would be a bit harsh to

call it an experiment, but it's certainly provisional, in contrast to essence, that's permanent and eternal. This next step is perhaps an even bigger one to get our head round than the notion that creation came about as a theatre for God to be with us in Christ. This is the ultimate purpose of all things. And that is as a kind of reverse of the incarnation. The purpose of creation is that God become what we are and be with us in Christ. But creation doesn't have the last word. That's not by any means the end of the story. The end of the story is that we become what God is, at least in the sense that through resurrection we become God's companions forever, beyond creation, beyond mortality, beyond the flaws of our current existence: that we are with God, with one another and with the new creation forever. We are taken into essence – not to be God, but to be eternally *with* God; not to be absorbed into God, but to be in God's presence, as the psalm says, where we find the fulness of joy. So here is my fourth platform: the ultimate purpose of humankind is to be God's companion forever. Which shows God has no ultimate aim that does not involve being with us and that we have no ultimate meaning other than in relationship to God. Here I stand.

The fifth step is to say, 'How do we know that there is essence beyond existence, how do we know that that essence is personal, indeed Trinitarian, how do we know that God seeks relationship and destines us to be in relationship forever?' The answer to all these questions is a single word. That word is Jesus. Imagine an hourglass, and think of the top half as existence, which thinks of itself as all-encompassing, and yet is largely unaware of the bottom half on which it depends, which is essence. Then focus your attention on the aperture between the top half of the hourglass and the bottom. That aperture, through which all the sand passes, wholly belongs to the top half and wholly belongs to the bottom half. That aperture is Jesus, through whom God is with us, and through whom we are with God. As we customarily put it, Jesus is fully human and fully divine. This fifth step is perhaps where a person of my convictions ought to begin. I didn't begin there because I'm not sure we fully appreciate step five until we've got a grasp of the first four steps.

Now, there are two common misconceptions about Jesus. The first, that of what we might call the world, is that Jesus is simply fully human. This is a perfectly understandable view: the Christian claim is about something absolutely unique, and completely unique phenomena are almost by definition, and certainly by scientific method, practically unbelievable. We need to set aside aspirations to proof, and accept that it's almost impossible

to prove or disprove a unique phenomenon. I actually welcome the secular view that Jesus is fully human, because it's a healthy counter to the alternative misconception. That's the hyper-Christian popular view that Jesus is wholly divine, and no more than superficially human at all. That latter view devalues existence as the price of asserting essence. It takes away the very heart of Christianity, which is God seeking genuine relationship with us so earnestly that God becomes one of us without ceasing to be God.

And here we've reached the epicentre of what I think Christianity is fundamentally about. It's about the truth, deep in the heart of God, made known in God's covenant with Israel, fully and utterly embodied in the life of Jesus, and to be finally realised in the life we'll share beyond existence, that the bedrock of all reality and purpose, and the only sure ground of significance, lies in the word *with*. All solitariness is ancillary to togetherness. All endeavour is a means towards the end of being with one another. The life of God, the nature of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is inherently relational. Relationship isn't a collaborative technique to enhance effectiveness and pool resources to advance towards some worthy end; it is the end towards which all things tend. In the life beyond existence, in the eternity of essence, there will be no work, no striving, no means we have to employ to reach some appropriate end: there will be only end, only relationship, only with. We will be with God, with ourselves, with one another and with the renewed creation. The four great divisions, the four great alienations of our existence – our separation from God, ourselves, one another and the creation – will cease. All will be relationship, and relationship will be more than enough – beyond every beyond.

All of this we discover in Jesus. We see in the gospels how Jesus is utterly with God, speaking as Son to Father, utterly in sync with the Spirit. We see how Jesus is utterly with himself, content alone, content to linger in Nazareth, content with his calling, content with the costs of his coming. We see how Jesus is utterly with us, weeping at the death of Lazarus, abiding with Mary and Martha, standing alongside the woman caught in adultery, in the Beatitudes offering his own autobiography of solidarity with the deprived and oppressed. We see how Jesus is utterly with creation, dwelling with the wild beasts in the wilderness, walking on the water, describing his realm in the imagery of agriculture. So here is my third platform: Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. As he was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Here I stand.

The sixth step is to recognise the tragedy of Jesus being with us. And this is to return to the third of the four insights I outlined earlier: relationship is characterised by story. The relationship between God and humankind, embodied by Jesus, does not go well. Jesus experiences betrayal, desertion, perfidy, oppression, injustice, calumny, humiliation, agony, insult, violence, hatred. Humankind has an allergic reaction to being with God. The gospels tell the story of who Jesus is, how he manifests what it means to be with us, and how we utterly fail to be with him. Every human being can locate themselves among the range of responses the gospels portray towards Jesus. But these responses are not static: Jesus does not come among us simply at an isolated moment in time: he experiences the danger of Bethlehem, the escape of Egypt, the nurture of Nazareth, the wilds of the wilderness, the fervour of Galilee, the maelstrom of Jerusalem, the restoration of Galilee again: his story encompasses the range, the undulation, and the scope of human emotion and experience, in its grief and joy, its fear and hope.

It devalues the texture of this story, and empties Jesus' being with us of all significance, if one assumes Jesus came among us in order to die. That is not to deny his death was inevitable – in due course, because he was fully human, and perhaps as a young man and brutally, because humankind was always likely to have an allergic reaction to him. But to acknowledge these things is not to say he came with a specific commission to take on his shoulders the whole weight of human shortcomings and by his death atone for them. Such a claim misses the heart of Christianity. Jesus came to embody, definitively, what it means, always meant, and always will mean for God to be with us. That's a much bigger scope than simply coming to eradicate sin.

If I now summarise the five steps I've outlined to this point, the significance of the cross should become clear. (1) There is existence and beyond existence there is essence. (2) God is relationship and seeks relationship. (3) Creation is the theatre in which God becomes one like us and dwells with us. (4) The ultimate purpose of humankind is to be God's companion forever. (5) Jesus is God with us.

Now consider those five statements in the light of the cross. To say all five statements depend upon Jesus dying in a particular way to conquer something or substitute for someone or be a sacrifice to atone for something else is absurd. The mistake such claims make is crystallised in my fourth insight earlier: they all assume the story is about us; they all assume the point of God is to fix our two human problems – number one, mortality, that we

die, and number two guilt, that we sin – and that Jesus is a piece of technology that neatly fixes these two problems and then is no further use to us. But that is the fundamental flaw in anthropocentric theology: it makes God a device in an intrinsically human story. What we need to do is to turn the story round and make it a truly theocentric story – a story perceived from God’s point of view. (This is a discipline known as theology, after all. The clue is in the name.) Once we do that, this is what we see.

God is relationship: the persons of the Trinity being with one another. God creates the universe for relationship – fundamentally to be with us. God ultimately purposes to draw us into essence and thus to be with us and the renewed creation forever. In Jesus God comes among us in an embodied way to be with us definitively and utterly. Against this heritage and destiny we can see clearly what the cross means. If Jesus walks down the *via dolorosa* and halfway along says, ‘Actually, d’you know what, I don’t fancy it. Could you send those armies of angels and scoop me up so I don’t have to go through with this?’, the crisis is not that he flukes the moment when he fixes the human sin and guilt problem. The crisis is that God has in Trinity, creation, eschatology and incarnation displayed an *absolutely consistent commitment to be with us come what may*, whatever befall, and that here when that resolution, which is the very identity of God, is put to its ultimate test, Jesus would be *denying the intrinsic reality of who he is*, who God is. It would question, overturn, discredit, even invalidate the fundamental character of God, the very bedrock of essence and existence. That’s some crisis. That’s a far more poignant understanding of the cross than the idea that Jesus was performing some kind of preordained script.

So Jesus does go to the cross, after reflecting, most obviously in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the reasons why he might not want to do so. And what exactly happens on the cross? Why is the cross rightly the centre of Christian devotion, even if not because it’s a device for fixing our sin and guilt problem? Two things happen on the cross. First, Jesus has to choose between being with the Father and being with us. The way the cross stretches Jesus to breaking point is clear in his dying words, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ This moment literally tears Jesus in two, because he is fully human and fully God, but right at this second he can’t be fully with us and fully with the Father. And the moment is made more acute because we have done everything we could possibly do to make it clear we don’t want to be with him. Yet he still chooses to be with us. That’s what the cross means: God’s utter,

unshakeable will to be with us regardless of our aversion to return the compliment and whatever the cost to God. Heart of my own heart, whatever befall.

But there's more. There's the second thing that happens on the cross. The Father has to choose whether to let the Son be with us, or whether to insist that the relationship of the Trinity is unbreakable, even if that means sundering God's unshakeable commitment to be with us. Notice Jesus' dying words: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Spirit is usually translated with a lower-case s, but it could just as easily be translated with a capital S and mean Holy Spirit. Jesus is saying he is utterly bereft and alone, abandoned by humankind and isolated from the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is the most awesome moment in all eternity. Yet the Father lets it happen, because Jesus is embodying and enduring the ultimate consequence of God's fundamental commitment to be with us, come what may. It's not a conquest: it's a gift. If there is any triumph, it is the triumph of with over for. It's the complete demonstration that God is a God of with rather than a God of for, a God of solidarity rather than a God of fixing problems. That is the climax of the story of God. A demonstration that we will never walk alone. Here I stand.

The seventh step is the vindication of the first five steps in the face of the sixth step. In short, the apocalyptic sight of Jesus going to such lengths to be with us that it jeopardises the integrity of the Trinity does not have the last word. The last word lies with the Spirit breathing new life into Jesus and reuniting the Trinity and restoring God and humankind to be with one another again and forever. The word for all those things is resurrection, and the moment they all take place at the same time is Easter Day. Note what Easter Day isn't: it isn't the immediate and total obliteration of our guilt and mortality problem. This is the other flaw in the traditional account of Christ's passion. In the traditional account, Jesus conquers sin and death. But, as countless observers have noted, not least in the light of the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, to name but three of the most egregious moments in human history, sin and death are still very much with us. But so is Jesus. And that is the point. If you take the assumption of for, that God is for us, and is around to fix all our problems, then you must accept the criticisms of those in every century who've said that that God is either a monster, a failure, or more politely, an underachiever. But if you take the recognition that God is with us, you realise the resurrection is a statement not

of conquest, but of utter, unbreakable and unending solidarity, whatever happens. Easter is a convergence of creation (remember it happens on the first day of the week) and eschatology (because it displays in Jesus what will happen to humankind and the whole creation on the last day). It shows us the presence of God in Christ that we see in the incarnation and the relentless commitment of God to us that we behold in the crucifixion. It is truly the day of all days, that contains every other day. The resurrection proclaims and demonstrates that eternity will be with God and nothing can separate us from God's love. Here I stand.

We can imagine Eastern and Western theology like this. Western theology is like an arch that stretches from the fall to the cross. It is obsessed with the way the cross reverses the results of the fall. Eastern theology has a much larger arch, that begins before the fall at creation, and ends after the cross at the last day. Hence despite the Eastern Orthodox church being much smaller than the Western Catholic and Protestant churches. Eastern theologians have asserted that they have a much bigger God. I humbly suggest that the story I've been telling here is a third arch, bigger still than the Eastern arch: one that stretches from Trinity to eternity. And I humbly suggest that though the Eastern arch is commendably bigger than the Western arch, the Eastern arch is still rather too much of an anthropocentric story, and is still too much tied to a God of for, whereas the third arch I'm describing is a theocentric story about a God of with.

The Significance of Where I Stand

So that's the second part of my lecture, on the seven steps that shape the ground on which I stand. I want to take you back to the four insights about significance I mentioned earlier. You'll recall I maintained that (1) significance is not achieved but bestowed; (2) significance is fundamentally found in relationship; (3) relationship is characterised by story; and (4) the way to understand story is to begin by recognising the story is not fundamentally about me. What I want to suggest is that these four insights offer us the elements from which we can build an account of what sin is. For me, sin is that which inhibits being with – that denies our origin and contradicts our destiny, that runs counter to our purpose and obscures our identity.

To take the first insight, sin is an action that entirely denies our existence is a gift, but instead treats it as a right and an entitlement to do with as we please. To take the second insight, sin is that which dismantles, poisons and destroys relationship. To take the third insight, sin substitutes a false story for a true one. To take the fourth insight, sin makes the story always about me, and never about God. To take the definitive example, the serpent persuades Eve and Eve persuades Adam that they don't have to regard Eden as a gift, but can treat it as a possession; the serpent's words poison the relationship between them and God, and ultimately between them and each other and Eden itself; the serpent tells them a false story that turns abundance into scarcity, diverting their attention from the glory of the whole garden to focus on the one fruit they can't eat; and the only way for them to be restored is to re-enter a story that is all about not them but God.

Only when we grasp the seven steps I've laid out about who God is, and when we recognise and acknowledge the truth of how sin inhibits our lives, can we appreciate what it means to be church. For church is the community in which we seek to live the true story of the seven steps above in the light of the false story I've briefly just outlined. See what church isn't. Church isn't tapping into the signs of salvation, baptism and Eucharist, to ensure we benefit from Christ's passion in such a way that, when we die, we go upstairs rather than downstairs. Church is allowing us to be enfolded into a true story, in which we're defined not by our asserted identity but by our grace-filled belonging. That true story is not one about us, but one in which we're incorporated and granted a role in a story that's all about God. And that true story is one that is in the beginning, is now and ever shall be about relationship, about God's original, continuing, unbreakable and ultimate commitment to be in relationship with us.

Which means church is about embodying what it means to be with, in four dimensions. First, to be with God: to pray, and thus enter that point of the aperture between existence and essence that Jesus occupies, which is why we end our prayers 'through Jesus Christ.' To pray is to see paltry existence from wondrous essence, and thus to confess our failure; to see wondrous essence from paltry existence, and thus to marvel and exalt; to offer to essence the fragility of existence, and thus to intercede; to perceive the aperture of Jesus between essence and existence, and the perpetual being with that embodies, and thus to give thanks. Second, to be with ourselves is to be our own companion the way God is with us; to love ourselves the way God loves us;

not to sacrifice ourselves on the altar of guilt or self-rejection, but to fulfil the vocation the Spirit gives to us alone. Third, to be with one another is both to form a community of hope that demonstrates the possibilities of social relations not found elsewhere, and to anticipate heaven by striving to be with all God's children in the light of the true story that there is enough for all and to spare. The calling of the church is to be with one another now the way we'll be together forever, most obviously to celebrate and embrace those whom the world reviles and persecutes yet Jesus calls blessed. Fourth, to be with creation is to live God's future now by treating our world as a gift to be enjoyed not a resource to be expended.

In short, it's all about grace, it's all about with, it's all about story and it's all about God. The word that draws together grace, with, story and God is Jesus. And this is the answer to the question with which we began. The significance of our lives is the degree to which we appreciate what Jesus means, not as a device to fix our temporal and eternal problems, not as a badge that makes one person better, more blessed or more righteous than another, but as a mystery of essence and existence that we shall never fathom, but are instead invited to explore, together. That universal invitation and shared exploration is not simply the significance of our lives, but the way we shall live forever. Here I stand.