

Sunday 5 July 2020, 4 After Trinity

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-End

“Talking Heads?”

Thirty years after their original release, Alan Bennett’s Talking Heads have returned to our screens in a new version. Filmed during lockdown, with social distancing observed throughout, these character monologues were identified as ideal fare for a nation in crisis. It’s not just that they could be made without anybody’s safety being compromised, although they could. It’s not just that they and their author are reassuringly familiar, although they are. It’s also that their very format speaks to and speaks of our times. A lone figure addresses his or her audience from a screen, and, speaking, mingles the trite and the profound with the everyday and the hidden. Many of us will have had our own Talking Heads moments in these weeks, when we’ve Face Timed an isolated relative or taken part in a Zoom meeting – or even tuned in to a Daily Reflection from the Cathedral.

The quality of the cast has been a feature of the new series, with the cream of British acting talent queueing up to play one of Bennett’s misfits and loners. Jodie Comer, fresh from delighting millions as the charismatic but murderous Villanelle, appeared as Leslie, a D-List actress whose Big Chance comes in a low-budget piece of soft pornography; Martin Freeman, for some, for ever Bilbo Baggins, appeared as Graham, neurotically attached to his mother and wrestling with paranoid delusions. Talking Heads. Actors. Playing parts.

One of the puzzles for the first Christians was working out whether what they had witnessed in Jesus was a sort of theological-cum-cosmological Talking Head, a phenomenon in which God had, as it were, donned a wig, applied the greasepaint, affected a regional accent, and played the part of a human being. The startling notion that the transcendent God of Earth and Heaven had become incarnate in a human life took some getting used to and provoked reaction. Docetic Christians, for example, held that Jesus’s physical body had been an illusion all along: he had merely appeared to live among us. But the startling notion took hold, and the first Christians learned to proclaim that the transcendent God of Earth and Heaven had indeed become incarnate in a human life. There was no play-acting about it. Which is why a Gospel passage like this morning’s jars ever so slightly. For in it, Jesus briefly but undoubtedly plays a part.

John the Baptist is in prison and has sent his followers to ask Jesus who he is. To help the crowd understand his answer Jesus imagines a scene. Children are sitting in the marketplace calling to one another, in one of those playground games that most of us remember. Jesus gives voice to their calls. “We played the flute for you” they call “and you did not dance”; “We wailed” they call “and you did not mourn”.

Children have their familiar rhymes and their well-worn routines as they play out. They have fixed ideas about John and fixed ideas about Jesus as they do about all grown-ups – it’s one of the realities that Alan Bennett uses to huge effect - but neither John nor Jesus can match up to these or will match up to these fixed ideas. John, ascetic, grim-faced, calling

the people to repentance, will not dance. Jesus, dining with tax-collectors and drinking in the homes of sinners, refuses to mourn.

The children have no idea who either of them really is. One won't dance; one won't mourn; who on Earth are they; why won't they get with the plan? And the crowds who surround Jesus are like those children. They have no idea who he really is. He is playing a part to make that point, and with his next breath he is speaking as himself again. "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds". Look at what I am doing, he says, look at what is happening around me. That is who I am.

I am overjoyed that we are worshipping together in the Cathedral this morning, and that the end of our days as disembodied Talking Heads may be in sight. But as we resume our common life this Gospel passage poses us substantial questions about the months that we have just lived through. All of us have developed new habits and new routines. With no shops to go into our relationship with our money may have changed; with no hairdressers working our relationship with our appearances may have changed. If you're like me, then your relationship with your clipper-wielding loved one will most definitely have changed. It's an irony that at a time when our gardens have never looked more manicured, most of us have never looked less manicured. Do we lay aside these changes – the new habits and new routines – as if they were parts we've played, as Jodie Comer and Martin Freeman have done; as Jesus does in the second half of the Gospel passage? Do we take them off as casually as we take off one of the face-coverings that we've become used to? With the performance of *Lockdown, the Drama*, behind us, do we return to life as it was before?

We can't, for the very good reason that we're not the people we were when we last met in this place. I said at the beginning of lockdown that losing the building, losing gatherings such as this, losing choral music, losing sacramental encounter, losing all that left us with... everything. For in this time we have not lost God and God has most certainly not lost us. As we have taken our permitted exercise, and tended our flower-pots, and queued for the supermarket, and watched boxsets online God has been with us. In great joy and in black despair – and, to me at least, lockdown has brought both - God has been with us. And his being with us has been about what it's always about: our healing, our liberty, our redemption. Our lockdown selves are not a part we've played in a play that is ending. We're not getting back to the real business of living after a diverting night at the theatre. No: our lockdown selves are part of what we are becoming. So, what is that?

At the end of the Talking Head *A Lady of Letters* Bennett's character Irene is in prison. She says that she has never been happier. There, at last, she has found things that she has never known that she has lacked: purpose, companionship, love. We are emerging from the prison of lockdown. I doubt that many of us would say the same of it as Irene does. But what would we say? Perhaps, like me, you don't know. It's been such an overwhelming experience, and it's not over yet. But Jesus invites us to approach one who is gentle, and humble. And what I happen to believe is that if we ask, God will show us where he has been, and where we have been, and how we have been changed. God will speak to us, and through us, to an awakening world that needs to hear him. Amen.