

**'The Naming of Cats is a Difficult Matter':
On Being Particular About Things**

*A Sermon preached in Duke Chapel on the 5th Sunday after Epiphany
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by the Revd Canon Dr Ben Quash, Dean of Peterhouse, University of Cambridge*

Isaiah 40:21-end; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

'Do you not know? Have you not heard? It is the LORD who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name.'

+In the Name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you for having me here; thanks especially to my friend Sam for making it possible. And greetings to one distinguished university from another across the water.

I had no idea when I agreed to come and preach on this date that it would be one of the great events of the US calendar. The Lord may well bring out *his* host by number, as our text from Isaiah reminds us, but the Super Bowl doesn't do a bad job either. The excitements of today take me back to my first ever visit to the United States, which was also an unexpected encounter with the Super Bowl. I was an 18 year old, just out of High School and on my way to spend a year working in New Zealand before going on to University. It was the first time I had travelled so far from home, or for so long. First time out of Europe; first time in the States. I felt rather scared, and very *anonymous*. And I have to say that Los Angeles airport, where I spent some hours waiting for a connecting flight, doesn't do much to allay feelings of anonymity. But what I was witnessing as I saw enthusiastic Super Bowl supporters passing through the airport lounges, with the colours and badges and caps of their teams, and their fellowship together, was the opposite of anonymity. I was seeing people who had received particular definition by their support of one team or another. Particularized people, gathered around a name.

Well *now*, for me, visits to the States always involve renewed contacts with friends - and that sense of anonymity I had as I went out into the big, wide world for the first time twenty years ago has diminished. So there's been some progress. I even know that it's the Pittsburgh Steelers playing the Seattle Seahawks tonight - I know the *names*, even though I have no idea whom I ought to be supporting. (Maybe you all can advise me on that afterwards.)

'Do you not know? Have you not heard? It is the LORD who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name.'

It's naming I want to think about this morning - and all that goes with it in terms of the honouring of people's particularity, their uniqueness. Honouring particularity is a Christian calling: a high one and a hard one. Naming is a 'difficult matter', as T.S. Eliot put it. He was talking of course about the naming of cats, but it's true of the naming of all creatures, and humans supremely, when the intention is really to get at their irreducible quiddity - what another poet in the same tradition of English letters, Hopkins, would call their 'arch-especial spirit'; the 'forgèd features' of each person and thing; their 'individual markings and mottlings'. Both Eliot and Hopkins stand in a tradition that runs back through centuries of English-speaking intellectual life, a tradition which

mistrusts the value of universal concepts, and wants to meditate on the actual, present individual; wants not to generalise, but to *name*.

The naming of cats is a difficult matter not just because it's hard to get right, but because it carries demands and obligations with it. Again, what is true for cats is true all the more for human persons, but let me illustrate this point by just sticking with cats for a moment. To know a cat's name is to be in *relationship* with it. And from that point on, it's no merely anonymous cat; you can't overlook its needs in the same way as you might have done before. It can't ever again be invisible to you. If it's hungry, it will be harder for you not to feed it once it has a name. And yet its arrival in your life may not have been something you especially chose. Maybe it was a stray cat that adopted *you*, chanced to track a little mouse to *your* cellar. There are countless millions of stray cats across the globe - and you probably, like me, don't usually give them a second thought. But of all the cats in all the towns in all the world, this one walks into yours: into your town, into your yard. And then it's somehow got particular. And that's a bit more difficult to extricate yourself from.

Our readings from Scripture today tell us that with particularity may come all sorts of demands, but they also tell us that it's *great*. All three readings together constitute a magnificent celebration of particularity. Let's look at Isaiah 40.

In this passage we hear the words of God to a people who are rediscovering over again the miracle of deliverance. Unexpected and decisive deliverance. The sudden permission to return from exile in Babylon to their own land bursts upon them wholly unexpectedly, like a desert dawn, and they are reminded again of the Exodus, because this return is like a *second* Exodus. And that in turn looks to them like a sort of recapitulation of creation itself, when God drew the world into being from what was just void. This section of the Book of Isaiah loves to draw those links. 'Out of a situation where there was no identity, where there were no names, only the anonymity of slavery and the powerlessness of the ghetto, God makes a human community; . . . gives it or restores to it a territory'; calls it *by name*.¹ These lost cats coming back from Babylon find themselves named, and there is a promise that goes with that naming; a renewed promise to maintain relationship with them; to care for them: 'Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel . . .' (there you can hear their names, on God's lips), 'why do you say "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth . . . He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.'

And then there is St Paul, writing to the Corinthians. He is doing a truly extraordinary thing in this passage: he is seeking the unique particularity of all those to whom he hopes to bring the Gospel, and he is trying to come into a new and closer relationship with them in the name of that Gospel. He is naming cats - left, right and centre. And that is changing him, too, as relationships always do. It is stretching him in all kinds of new ways towards a fuller comprehension of the limitless love of God in Christ. Not limitless in a bland, generalised, abstract way, but limitless in its reaching towards each particular person. Limitlessly particular. Paul is the servant of the Gospel, and so he works to provide for all people by meeting them in their particularity. He is striving to feed the stray cats of the Gentiles, whom he has found turning up at his door asking to be fed, along with the Jewish house cats he already had obligations to. To the Jews, he is a Jew;

¹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 67-68.

to those outside the law, he becomes like one outside the law; to the weak, weak; and so on. And this is not some sort of chameleon-like behaviour, though it could so easily be read like that. Paul is not saying whatever his audience at the time might want to hear; pandering to them; trimming his sail to the wind. He is, on the contrary, *conforming himself to Christ*. He is pouring himself out, setting himself and his rights and his inheritance aside, in order to really encounter the others he is confronted with in all the particularity that is theirs, because that is what Christ did. Paul didn't ask these cats to come into his yard. As he says: 'necessity is laid upon me'. But his life is now Christ's, and he has entered the university of love where Christ is teacher.² And that is a university where love is always concretely and particularly taught and learned - not in generalities. And it requires a response to what is in front of you, under your nose, here and now.

Which brings me to the intriguing figure of Simon Peter's mother-in-law in the Gospel today. She perhaps more than any other figure in our readings is like a stray cat who just happens to be at a particular place at a particular time. She finds herself under Jesus's nose, so to say; it doesn't seem as though either of them sought the other out. She happens to be in his path.

Now in the way that New Testament scholars do, a New Testament scholar friend of mine in Cambridge said of this little scene: 'Well, it's so inconsequential it's almost bound to be genuine - why else include it in the Gospel? It's not a dramatic or exciting miracle, like the multiple healings of the demoniacs which follow. It's just Simon Peter's mother-in-law, with a fever.' And in one way it *is* inconsequential. But in another way the whole particularizing miracle of the Christian Gospel is displayed in this little scene. It is, after all, deeply personal. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is not a representative figure. She doesn't stand for anything. She's not a symbol or a concept or a type. She's *Simon Peter's mother-in-law*, and she's ill, and she finds herself in Jesus's presence, and he takes her by the hand and raises her up. It's *her* re-creation. It's *her* exodus. It's *her* return from Babylon. And Jesus has related to her wholly as herself, as the unique and irreplaceable person she is.

How unique and irreplaceable do *you* feel, I wonder? How cherished? All sorts of things in our experience can combine to make us feel, occasionally, that we could be substituted for, and that we have nothing in particular that makes us special. Perhaps we were a middle child eclipsed by a talented older sister or brother; or perhaps by a *younger* sister or brother who was always doted on as the 'baby' of the family at our expense. Perhaps we were made to feel by people we loved or respected that we didn't live up to certain of their *ideals* of what we ought to be; or that we didn't match up to certain of their *expectations* for us. In a university setting like this one, where *everyone* seems to be clever and hard-working and successful and popular, it's easy to feel not very special. Nothing much, it often seems, hangs on our *uniqueness*.

And perhaps we feel some of those things in relation to God, too. Perhaps we think that for God, our small, transient lives are of no consequence. Perhaps we think, sometimes, that what matters for God is the working out of his purposes in a sort of abstract way. Perhaps we think that the unique *persons* which human beings separately are are pretty incidental to the big plan of God, and therefore expendable.

²I owe the phrase 'university of love' to John Milbank; cf. *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 228.

This puts me in mind of an excerpt from a letter proposing marriage, written in another era than our own, by one Ralph, Lord Lovelace to a woman called Margaret Stuart Wortley:

‘If you find yourself unwilling to accept me, will you please pass this letter on to your sister Caroline’.

That’s no doubt a very *efficient* way of proceeding, but not actually very romantic. What it presupposes is that the sisters are substitutable for one another. For Ralph, Lord Lovelace, the thing of real importance is a suitable match and that is something that can be achieved by marriage to a variety of possible ‘candidates’. Nothing hangs on the uniqueness of a single person. There are numerous means to a particular end, which in this case, is the particular end of his being suitably married. There are *numerous routes to the goal he has in mind*.

In fact, both Margaret Stuart Wortley and her sister Caroline refused Ralph, Lord Lovelace - but he managed to marry the eldest sister Mary in the end.

What is it that we find unacceptable about that way of proceeding? Why is it that an impersonal - though perhaps very practical, functional approach - is so clearly a failure; so clearly missing the point? It’s because we know that there is something about personhood which is indefinable and precious. There’s something about people in all their variety, which makes it impossible ever totally to substitute one for another. This is why a personal letter, written especially to you, is so much nicer to receive than a circular. This is why even just a few personalizing words added to the bottom of an official piece of correspondence can make such a big difference to the way you are disposed to respond to it. It’s become a particular communication from another person to you: to you as slightly different from anyone else.

This is also why, when we love someone, they are irreplaceable when we lose them from our lives - even though we may have any number of other loving friends and family as well as them.

What our readings show us today is that we *are* utterly precious to God; we are cats with names. Our readings show that God is not just interested in achieving his goals in a sort of abstract way, regardless of who helps or hinders him. Rather, he is interested in the *persons for their own sake*. A god for whom the question ‘Who?’ doesn’t matter is not the Christian God. The Christian God is not a God who would say, like a managing director of a powerful firm: ‘I don’t care who does it, or how; just make sure that it gets done’. Or, like Ralph, Lord Lovelace: ‘I don’t care which of you marries me – Margaret, Caroline *or* Mary; I just want to be sure I’m married’.

God is the creator, redeemer and lover of *persons*. The personalizing love Jesus shows to those around him, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law included, testifies to this. It is a display of God’s own way of loving, and it’s a way of loving in particularity in which the value of the person is *never* relativized in the name of a bigger project or an abstract principle. It’s a fact about God’s way of loving that we are absolutely cherished in our uniqueness: each of us a beloved child of God by our baptism. Not to be substituted for – ever.

But perhaps you still have a niggling question in your mind: it’s all very well Simon Peter’s mother-in-law being healed, but what is to be done about all the other mothers-

in-law who never found themselves lucky enough to have him cross their path? Let alone all the other sick people in the world? Or, a comparable question, what about all the other stray cats in the world? Feeding the one who turns up in your yard doesn't help the rest of them. Well those are good questions. I'm going to finish by responding in two ways.

Where *we* are concerned, the proper response should be something like St Paul's answer. We are to imitate the one who was supremely there *for* the world, by being for it ourselves. We are to do what we can to widen the range of our encounters in Christ's name, with the power that is in us, trusting to God that he will graciously provide us out of ourselves with the resources we need for this task. *But*, we are *not* to think there is some other route to doing God's work than being particular and personal. Formulating universal principles for the care of cats and the healing of mothers-in-law all too easily becomes an alternative to feeding the cat who came to your door and invited you to name it, or helping the mother-in-law of the friend whose house you went to visit. There is no substitute for face to face encounter in service of the Kingdom of God. It is never served by escape from the particularity of the here and now, the you and me; by retreat into generality. And if we are worried that we cannot do it all ourselves, cannot make the whole difference, or solve the whole problem, then that is probably a good lesson for us to learn. For in God's providence, we have to trust that other agencies than ours are working together for good, that others will be feeding other cats, that it is not all just down to us.

The second part of my answer to that question – 'what about all the rest?' – is a comment about Jesus Christ. There are some thrilling words at the end of today's Gospel. Simon and his companions find Jesus praying in a desolate place, before sunrise, and they say to him '*Everyone* is looking for you'. And he said to them, 'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out'. And they went.

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law is only a beginning. It is the beginning not of a generalized proclamation to the whole world, or a standardized care package for issue in all cases of need. It is the beginning of an indefinite series of particular encounters, particular facings, particular renewals, particular givings of names. Jesus sets off to begin the process of going from town to town. And the miracle of his resurrection means that he can still do it – he is *alive*, he is the *risen* one. He is still making his way to our door, still holding his hands out to us, still speaking our own particular name. And we need have no fear that he will overlook any of us, or fail to reach us. 'Everyone is looking for you', say the disciples. 'Each will be met', says Jesus. For he is the Lord, the saviour of all, who numbers the hairs of our heads, and knows us all more intimately than we know ourselves. To him be honour and glory, worship and blessing, now and to the ages of ages. Amen.