

Week 2 – What is the purpose of my existence?

Evolved to be sad

A few years ago, I read the fascinating book *Bounce*, by Matthew Syed. In the mid-nineties, Syed was the British number one in Table Tennis. I have never been British number *anything* in *anything*. It was therefore an encouraging book for someone like me, having sometimes experienced frustration at my lack of sporting prowess. Syed argues sporting success is not simply down to talent that we happen to be born with, but rather things that can be within our control like opportunity, practice and mind-set.

Whilst a fascinating book in many ways, one chapter left me feeling a little despondent. In this part of the book, he cites a number of examples of sportsmen and women who experienced a sense of anti-climax after great sporting successes. He gives the example of Victoria Pendleton, British track cyclist and gold medallist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Pendleton worked harder than ever in 2008, rising early to do the lung-busting cardio work, pumping weights, making sacrifices in her personal and family life – you name it. Her entire being was directed at a few minutes of pedalling around an indoor track in China. That was her destiny and her ambition, her be-all and end-all. That is what it is like – that is what it has to be like – if you are serious about becoming the best. Then, in Beijing, in the theatre of dreams, calamity struck.

She won.

Consider her words, as honest as they are perplexed, just a few months after achieving her life-time ambition. ‘You have all this build-up for one day, and when it’s over, it’s: “Oh, is that it?”’

she said. 'People think its hard when you lose. But it's almost easier to come second because you have something to aim for when you finish. When you win, you suddenly feel lost.'¹

Syed gives other examples.

James Toseland wept in the privacy of his hotel room after winning his first Superbike world title. Martina Navratilova was afflicted with bouts of melancholy at many high points during her career. Matty Reisman, the table tennis hustler from New York's Lower East Side, bemoaned the futility of sporting achievement after his career-defining triumph at the English Open in 1949.²

If sport is not your thing, then how about this from a film:

One of the most famous episodes of anti-climax, sporting or otherwise, descended upon Harold Abrahams after he won a gold medal in the 1924 Olympics 100 metres. In one of the closing scnes of the film *Chariots of Fire*, he is portrayed in his dressing room looking sullen and confused, refusing to talk to anyone. One of his friends, who had lost in a previous race, asks what is wrong. 'One of these days, you are going to win yourself – and you are going to find that it is pretty difficult to swallow.'³

Why do so many sportsmen and women have this depressing sense of anti-climax? It's not limited to sport. Why do so many of us feel unfulfilled when we may have achieved so much? Syed puts it down to human evolution. Human emotions are survival mechanisms that have kept human beings alive. Fear has kept our distance from wild animals. Disgust has prevented us eating rotting food. It is easy to see how emotions help us every day. However, Syed sees a clear purpose for the emotion of anti-climax too. He writes:

From this vantage point, anti-climax begins to make perfect sense: millions of years of natural selection have sifted sequences of DNA just so that we can feel miserable in the aftermath of

¹ Matthew Syed, *Bounce: How Champions Are Made*, Fourth Estate, 2010 p282-283

² Ibid., p284-285

³ Ibid., p285

long-coveted triumph. Why? So that we are able to disengage from our triumph, enabling us to focus on the next challenge. If goal fulfilment induced indefinite periods of contentment, we would be robbed of all future motivation.

This perspective tells us that anti-climax is an evolutionary mechanism designed to help us in the struggle for survival. With this outlook, we have developed in such a way as to remain perpetually unsatisfied. Being satisfied will make us sit on our hands and sitting on our hands means we're not ready for the next battle. Therefore, satisfaction is short-lived and unsatisfied we must remain.

This view might sound a reasonable explanation in light of our own personal experience. We're never really satisfied. We always want something else.

However, might there be another explanation? Are our longings just about survival? At the root of this explanation is the assumption of human evolution and a human race without God as its explanation.

The man who calmed the storm

The New Testament gospels tell the story of Jesus' life. They tell of his birth, death and resurrection and also his words and actions. That includes his miracles. With Jesus, lepers are cleansed, lame men walk, blind men see and dead people live. The gospel of Luke however, does not begin with the life of Jesus. It begins with the birth of a man who became known as John the Baptist. He preached and baptised in the desert. He must have looked a strange figure. His clothes were made of camel hair and his food was locusts and wild honey.

His preaching was about someone special who was coming into the world. Could that person be Jesus? Luke writes about an occasion when John sent his followers to ask Jesus a question:

And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."⁴

How was John to know if Jesus was the special one he'd been waiting for? It was by seeing what Jesus did that people would understand who he was. As people witnessed the miracles of Jesus they were astonished.

It was Jesus' disciples who saw his miracles more than any others. On one occasion, in a boat, they were caught up in a storm. However, what did they find most terrifying - the storm, or that Jesus commanded it to stop and it did?

One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." So they set out,²³ and as they sailed he fell asleep. And a windstorm came down on the lake, and they were filling with water and were in danger. ²⁴ And they went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And he awoke and rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵ He said to them, "Where is your faith?" And they were afraid, and they marveled, saying to one another, "Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?"⁵

⁴ Luke 7:18-22

⁵ Luke 8:22-25

Who was this man? The disciples recognised that Jesus was no ordinary man. He did what no other man could do. Who can speak so that nature obeys?

History remembers King Canute (1016-35) as the foolish English monarch who attempted to command the sea. The story goes that his throne was carried down to the beach as the tide advanced. In the sight and hearing of his nobles he forbade the water to keep off his land. Naturally, the sea paid no attention. Historian, Robert Lacey suggests Canute has been unfairly remembered for the last thousand years or so. The first record of the event comes from Henry of Huntington. Lacey writes,

History's mistake has been the belief that Canute really did think he could stop the waves – according to Henry, the King thought quite the opposite.

'Let all the world know,' cried Canute as he retreated from his throne and contemplated his wet feet, 'that the power of kings is empty and worthless!' He shouted at the waves, in other words, to convey the message that he was *not* as all-powerful as he might seem, and he embellished his point with an additional religious lesson. 'There is no king worthy of the name,' he proclaimed, 'save God by whose will heaven, earth and sea obey eternal laws.'

The King of Heaven was the king who mattered, was his second message; and after this episode on the beach, according to Henry of Huntingdon, Canute never wore his golden crown again, placing it instead atop a figure of Jesus Christ.⁶

Whether Henry's account is the correct version of events or not, the disciples of Jesus, as they heard him rebuke the wind and waves - and then saw the wind and waves obey, could only reach one conclusion: Jesus was God, Creator and Ruler of all Creation.

Lost

⁶ Robert Lacey, *Great Tales From English History: Cheddar Man to the Peasants' Revolt c.7150 BC – AD 1381*, Little Brown 2003 p73-74

Who Jesus was relates to his mission. Why would God become man? What was the Creator of the universe (no other could command a storm) doing in a boat with fishermen?

Jesus told a series of parables about things that were lost. The first in the series was *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*:

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’⁷

The second was *The Parable of the Lost Coin*:

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins,^[a] if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’⁸

Both were stories people could relate to. Shepherds were considered outcasts by society – their job meant they were dirty and unclean. But Jesus welcomed outcasts, made clear by his story’s subjects - a story about a shepherd and a lost sheep. We also relate to frantically looking for something. We all know what it’s like to lose something and the frustration of turning everything upside down to find it.

⁷ Luke 15:4-6

⁸ Luke 15:8-9

Both stories are about someone searching. The shepherd searches for his lost sheep. The woman searches for her lost coin, cleaning out every corner in her effort to find it. In both stories, there's a great celebration at the end. The shepherd finds his sheep and calls his friends and neighbours to celebrate with him. The woman finds her coin and does the same. Jesus said the celebrations were *like* something. At the end of *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*, Jesus said:

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.⁹

At the end of *The Parable of the Lost Coin*, he said:

Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."¹⁰

The celebrations of the shepherd and the woman are like celebrations that take place in Heaven. Last week, we came across the word repent. We said repent means a complete change of direction. We are living life one way and we need to turn around and go the other way. When people change the direction of their lives, there are celebrations in Heaven.

There's more to come on repentance next week, but just consider for now how *being lost* is the main theme of these stories. The person who repents is like a sheep that was lost, but is found. The person who repents is like a coin that was lost, but also, is found. The Bible teaches that all of us are lost. We have wandered off in the wrong direction. We're in completely the wrong place.

⁹ Luke 15:7

¹⁰ Luke 15:10

But what are we lost from? Let's return to our little friend Zacchaeus again.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. That meant that, like shepherds, he was an outcast.

He was considered a traitor to the Jews. He was collecting taxes for the occupying

Romans. Worse still, he was a thief, guilty of having taken too much, pocketing a

surplus for himself. His creative calculations had made him a rich man. As

Zacchaeus looked down from the tree, Jesus looked up:

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.¹¹

This was great for Zacchaeus, but not so great for the reputation of Jesus. If you

read the gospels, perhaps you'll be struck by the compassion of Jesus for society's

most vulnerable – women, the ill and neglected and the immoral. But here, Jesus

spends time with one of the fat cats. Zacchaeus was a criminal who'd got rich by

exploiting many of the vulnerable people that found Jesus so compelling. It's not so

fashionable to be nice to people like that. There was grumbling:

And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."¹²

At the end of the episode, Jesus explains himself by making his mission clear:

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.¹³

Jesus came to find us. We are lost from him. The human race was made to know

God and be in relationship with him. But that's not where we are. We are people who

¹¹ Luke 19:5-6

¹² Luke 19:7

¹³ Luke 19:10

have wandered off. As Jesus' Jewish audience heard him tell a story about a shepherd searching for sheep, they would have been reminded of a well-known passage from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who said:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way¹⁴

All of us have wandered off. There are no exceptions. But Jesus came to seek the lost – and that includes unloveables like Zacchaeus.

Made to know God

The reason for our sense of anti-climax is that we are not living for what we were made. To be found, is to be found by Jesus. To be lost, is to be away from him.

At the beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis we read of the first man and woman. They are unique amongst all the creatures God made. God gives them instructions. He speaks with them. They speak with him. That did not happen with any of the other creatures God made. There is something unique about human beings. The opening chapters of Genesis are not a scientific textbook. They are written with a purpose and a perspective. The perspective is the human race.

When I was a student, I spent time travelling around China. I remember seeing world maps for sale on the streets of Beijing. At first, I didn't recognise them as world maps. We're used to seeing the United Kingdom in the middle of our maps. The Greenwich Meridian marks 0° longitude. In China, of course, the world is seen from a different perspective. The reason I didn't recognise a map of the world at first glance was because there, China's in the middle of the map. The universe God made is

¹⁴ Isaiah 53:6

immense. And yet, the Genesis account puts Earth at the centre. Why? Because it's the home of human beings. People are at the centre of the story. Everything in the universe was put together for them. God delighted in them and they delighted in God.

Human beings away from God will therefore suffer a sense of 'lostness'.

Let me quote C.S.Lewis again. He wrote this:

If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.¹⁵

Nothing in this world can resolve our sense of anti-climax than God himself.

When I owned my first car, I took great care of it. I washed it regularly and waxed it too. However, a day came when the car received a bump. It no longer looked the way it had before. It was still possible to see it was the same car – but it was no longer as it once was. In the same way, human beings are no longer the perfect human beings they once were. In many ways we're now spoiled. There's more on that to come in subsequent chapters. However, it is still evident that people are special and different to anything else in the world. And we sense it.

Human beings experience moments of awe and wonder. Some of my fondest memories of three years spent studying at Aberystwyth University are the stunning sunsets. Facing directly west out to Cardigan Bay, the sunsets could be breath taking. The donkeys on the promenade seemed unimpressed. People however, stopped and stared. It tells us we're special.

¹⁵ C.S.Lewis

Human beings have morals. I used to be a secondary school teacher. My last school developed a short list of expectations for pupils. They included simple statements like: work hard, try your best, join in and be kind. When pupils met those expectations, the school was a happier place. The expectations helped the school be a more ordered place. Some people say morality is much the same, in that, human beings have developed moral standards because the process of evolution taught us that getting along with each other was a good thing for survival. Arguing and fighting wouldn't help our family, group or tribe and so we developed morality to help us function more productively. Does that mean being kind is a helpful thing, but ultimately is not a necessary thing? How does that explain my sense of outrage when I feel I've been violated? I have my sense of right and wrong because the imprint of God is upon me.

People also experience times of ecstasy as well as times of deep sorrow. We have a sense of how things should be. We get angry about injustice. We are saddened by suffering. Injustice and suffering are surely the logical outcomes of a world that appeared quite by accident containing creatures struggling to survive. But within us, we have far higher expectations. We get angry at these things. We also feel outrage at particular crimes. Where has all this come from? The imprint of God is upon us. We were made to know God.

We know that our experience of life is not how it should be.

We're lost. But how did we get so lost?

