

## **The shape of daring imagination: coming out and coming home**

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*Sixth National Symposium on Catholicism and homosexuality  
Minneapolis, USA, March 2007*

*(Please note that in this transcription, '...' indicates a pause, not a cut or an edit)*

We started to look this morning at what it is like to be scandalised, and the beginnings of moving beyond scandal. And I'd like to go back to the little boy, or little girl, and share with you what I have learned to pray for. It took me a long time to be able to pray for this, but I think it's the prayer the little nine-year-old wanted to pray. It's a prayer for four things: a home; a heart; a husband; and a ministry. I tried to think of an H word to fit the other three Hs, but 'hinistry' didn't sound very good [laughter]. It would have been nice if we could talk about the four Hs, but we can't. Home, heart, husband and ministry – obviously, change gender perspectives at will. And of course, if we live with our desire scandalised, these are four things that it's very very difficult to imagine. They're obviously *good* things – which of us does not want a home? Somewhere where we have a sense of belonging, where we're recognised, where we are called by name, where we are received with joy – where we are received as we are, with joy, rather than being received on condition we pretend to be someone else. But home is a difficult thing to imagine when you're scandalised: it's a difficult thing to imagine that one's desire for home, is good. So, imagining the arduous good: what might it be like recovering that little-boy longing, that little-girl longing for home, and making it real, or making it more real for oneself and for others? A heart: one of the things of the scandalised heart, is the sense of not belonging anywhere, and actually, not being sure that I can even rely on my feelings. Is this only me, or is this something we have in common? Having been regularly, and apparently religiously, taught to distrust my feelings on the ground that they were wrong – and of course that's

devastating. That means, you don't really have a heart; or in as far as you do have a heart, it's a heart which might be toxic to other people. 'Be careful how you love them since you will only do them harm'. And how very very difficult it can be for us to receive a heart, the possibility that our love might be healthy, might not be frightened, might be able to imagine itself as building people up – this is a little-boy or a little-girl desire, and recovering it is central to the life of faith. A husband, or a wife: the little boy or the little girl longed for someone they could be with for ever. And how quickly voices of impossibility rushed in, to say, 'No! Not possible! Never! You're wrong even to want that'. And how difficult it is to recover the possibility that such a thing might be good, and possible, and blessed. Fighting off voices of impossibility, in terms of scandal – insisting, so as to be able to imagine the arduous good. Scandal closes down the possibility of imagining the arduous good. Ministry: as a little child, with a vocation, to exercise some ministry in the life of the church. Some ability to share the good news, to be part of something good, and positive, that shares the life of God: 'yes, but only if you pretend to be someone you're not'; yes, but so long as you don't tell the truth'; 'yes, but', 'yes, but', 'yes, but' – the scandalised mind. The arduous good – imagining what it might be like to discover that we are exercising a ministry, starting from where we are; that such ministries are compatible with having a home, a heart, and a husband, whatever form that takes. And that it's not wrong to want all these things – just like a greedy little child. How easily we are scandalised off from wanting all these things, like a greedy little child. Learning to imagine the arduous good...:

And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, "In a certain city, there was a judge, who neither feared God, nor regarded man".

A perfect judge – of the sort that your attorney-general<sup>1</sup> has been appointing generously throughout the country [laughter]. Actually this is an even more wonderful judge because this judge is simply a scandal – he is immune to regard. He's a block. Humans are constituted by the

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Gonzales was US Attorney-General at the time.

regard of other humans, and of God; someone who is not constituted by the regard of other humans and of God is simply a block, an obstacle. They're nothing except an obstacle.

“And there was a widow in that city, who kept coming to him, and saying, ‘Vindicate me against my adversary’”.

A widow, the most vulnerable; didn't have anyone to back her up, didn't have anyone to plead her case for her – just the sort of person who needs an advocate, especially when faced with such a difficult judge. But she didn't have one.

“For a while, he refused. But afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God, nor regard man’”

Insightful fellow – as you can see, he knew a block when he saw it [laughter], and he was it.

“‘Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow *bothers* me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming’”.

Apparently, the word there, refers to boxing and wrestling techniques – translated slightly too gently for us, but it has the impression of SuperWidow with gloves [laughter], and this poor block being knocked around the ring, and him getting fed up with it.

“...she will wear me out by her continual coming.” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them, speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Jesus manifestly does not think that God is an unrighteous judge, or a block. He does know, that all of us have unrighteous judges somewhere in the back of our head, and because of them, we do not cry out enough

to be vindicated. We don't carry on longing, and desiring, and wanting, against our blocks. We find it too easy to give up, and say – when we hear someone saying, 'I shouldn't want that if I were you... Better to want little, than to be disappointed... That's impossible, think of something else'. Don't we all have little judges, in the back of our heads? Who tell us, 'Don't desire. Don't *long*'. And what does our Lord say? 'No. Carry on – it's only by longing, and desiring, that you'll shift the bastard' [laughter]. Like the widow with her boxing gloves. But our Lord is quite sanguine: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Is he going to find people who have been able to carry on boxing for long enough, that their imaginations are still open, for them to want good things? That's his challenge. His challenge is, 'keep on desiring, keep on imagining the good – and wanting it'. That's how God works in you – that's how grace opens it up for it to become possible for you to have what you want, by desiring, and carrying on wanting. So imagining the arduous good is tremendously important for any of us, all of us, as we move beyond scandal.

Just to show that this is not a one-off, and how easy it is for us to get this entirely the wrong way round, remember this – when we think about optimism, pessimism, hope:

There were some present at that time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No: but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No: but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish".

And how easily, in our first hearing of something like that, don't we think, 'ooh – he's telling us we must behave'. Rather than: 'ooh – he's pushing us into re-imagining'. Because of course, what the people who had come to tell him about the Galileans were saying – they were full of excitement: there was a fight going on. Pilate's men had massacred some

people who Jews tended to regard – or some of the Jews at the time tended to regard – as slightly heretical Jews, because they did their sacrifices elsewhere. ‘Don’t you think that this is a sign, that maybe the end is coming?’. But Jesus says – he gives a completely secular answer: ‘If you think like that, then you will perish like that. If you think in such tit-for-tat terms, you will perish like that. You’ll be locked into tit for tat with each other, and you will be unable to imagine what God is really like, and what God is really bringing about. You, who think of yourself as good because you have Jerusalem, look at those Galileans – but didn’t a tower fall down in Jerusalem? Weren’t the inhabitants of Jerusalem just as innocent, or guilty, as those Galileans? But I tell you, if you think like that, if you imagine like that, you will likewise perish’.

And then he told them this parable. “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none. And he said to the vine-dresser, ‘Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down! Why should it use up the ground?’ And he – that’s the vine-dresser – said: ‘Let it alone sir, this year also, ‘til I dig about it and put on manure, and if it bears fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down’”.

And hearing that parable, how many of us imagine that the one who owned the vineyard is God, and this vine-dresser is a wimp? When in fact the parable is exactly the reverse: because the owner who comes to the vineyard, is a dunderhead if he thinks that a vineyard and fruit trees produce fruit after three years. As any Middle-Eastern horticulturalist will tell you, these start to produce fruit in the fourth year, and in the fourth year you have to pay the tithes of them, to redeem the first fruits. And then in the *fifth* year, is when you start to get really good produce. So this is not a story about God as the landowner, and a wimp as his vine-dresser; this is a story about humans trying to foreclose, with their dumb imagination – turning up before things are ready, demanding to see the fruit, when, as any A-Level biology student – or first-grade biology student – could have told them, coming after three years is a little bit early if you want a fruit tree. So that actually, the voice of God in this story is *not* the landowner, but the vine-dresser, who’s saying, ‘err, don’t

be impatient – this vineyard, creation, it's a small thing, of my own; be patient, allow me to put manure, allow me to produce the fruit at the right time; don't foreclose. If of course no fruit at all gets produced, then you can cut it down'. Of course, the vine-dresser knows, because he's in the business of producing the fruit, when it will come. The arduous good demands a healthy imagination that is able to inhabit time and space gracefully, to imagine that things are not in our control and don't need to be foreclosed by us.

Because of that, we can start to imagine a different way of looking at conversion. That word 'repent'... because of course, typically when we hear 'repent', we go back into scandalised mode, rather than imagination-boosting mode. But *metanoete* means 'change your mind', 'change your heart', allow yourself to imagine things a different way. That's the point of these parables. What might it be like for our heart to be broken, as we come to imagine greater goods than we have known? What kind of moves away from idols and towards the living God, who plants and provides and produces, can we imagine? What, for instance, could break our heart about 'family'? How do we imagine 'family'? We're going to have to become the champions of 'family values' in the next generation, because we're going to have to invent the arduous good. The 'easy good' seems to have been foreclosed, and people are getting very angry about it. What is the shape of the arduous good that is being brought into being – where stones that have been rejected will be the cornerstones? What is going to be the shape of the healthy imagination of 'family'? 'Family' as an arduous good, rather than a sacred 'not-so-good'. Something which tends to close down, rather than open up. What about our communities – and I mean the physical, urban, or not-urban, spaces in which we live, where we have significantly greater volunteer time – maybe – than many of the people for whom family, very appropriately, demands all their time and attention. What is going to be the shape of the arduous good of the construction of 'city', of 'parish' – forms of place where we might find homes, hearts, husbands and ministry; and might make it easier, rather than more difficult, for others to find other, difficult goods. What's going to be our understanding of poverty – meaning, what is going to be the shape of our broken-heartedness before people who are genuinely poor? For whom we have the time, the patience, to be able to imagine ways out

of the *embourgeoisement*... I don't know how you say that in American... the becoming *bourgeois* which is so easy for us, and in some cases, because we have come from such hard places, has seemed such a goal for us. How are we going to be able to imagine sharing, allowing our hearts to be broken, by the poverty of others, where we are rich? What's going to be the shape of 'education'? Education in the faith; for people who are not running away from what is central to Christianity but trying to rediscover what is central to Christianity from within? No longer scandalised by weird rows on the surface; but recreating that love of truth and of mercy which are essential to the Gospel. What's going to be the shape of 'mission' for us? How can we imagine what it might be like to hear, 'I have chosen you and I send you': an arduous good, imagining a broken-heartedness before people who need us. In other words, what's the shift from being broken-hearted by scandal, to being broken-hearted by grace? Do you see what I mean? It's an important shift.

For me, one of the most difficult, and important, things – and we're getting right back here to little-boy and little-girl stuff – is the ability to like. One of my books is called *On being liked* – and I chose it deliberately, because particularly in religious spheres we use the word 'love' an awful lot. And because we use the word 'love', which is rather a strong word, and which is often used with connotations of power and of great emotion, we find it difficult to imagine all of this, all of our lives, our scandal, our messes, being held in the regard of someone who looks at it, and whose first response is, 'And behold: it was very good'. Who's actually able to look at all this, and not be scandalised by it, and *like* it. And I mean that in rather a strong sense: what is it like to be able to live in a scandalised world, a world in which, apart from all the diseases and famine and hunger we contribute to, we are complicit in – wars, things like Abu Ghraib – things, all of which bespeak people who *really don't like* being human, and so are only prepared to be here on their own conditions and for as long as it seems OK. What is it like to be held, and to receive the heart, of One who doesn't feel the need to run away from these things, who is able to like? To say, in the middle of this, 'Behold: it is very good. I'm glad I'm in on this; I do not repent of being here'. Negating Ivan Karamazov: 'I do not want to give back my ticket'.

What's it like to be able to imagine the good because we are *liked*? And how quiet and gentle and delicate it is to be liked; and because it's quiet and gentle and delicate, how immune it is from ideology, from strife, from rivalry; and how difficult it is to sit in, over time. Yet without it, there is no imagination of the good. So when, as we break up into our groups, we think of projects – projects which involve moving away from 'heart ground down by scandal' and towards a heart broken open by grace, let's try and remember that each of these things we come to – education, mission, family, school, youth work, prisons, foreign aid, peace work – all of these things, depend on that movement from scandal, towards imagining the good. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

I dream – nobody asks a question and we can all go home [laughter].

Ah, behold, an angel [laughter, quiet applause]! Where do you want to take this? This is my challenge to you – obviously you've got the – the groups are for. What is it like for people who no longer need to be ground down by fear and scandal, to imagine the good? One of the cruellest, one of the cruellest things, with which I suspect we've all lived, is an inability to imagine the good, as it were an officially canonised inability to imagine the good. Imagine what it would have been like if the discussion about *Humanae Vitae* had made serious discussion of what real family life might look like – how one tiny little niggles could shut down a whole sphere of discussion about human flourishing. Well, we stand on the shoulders of the giants who had to face up to all that... we learn to put the niggles to rest, and say, 'What is the shape of the good?'. Sorry, Ken –

Q – You talked about the good of home, heart and ministry, yet the hottest topic today is husband, or wife. Can you say any more about that, that longing for that difficult, arduous good?

JA – well..., it's obviously a very geographically-related... isn't it, because of course there are some places where this is the law, straightforwardly, and other places where it appears to be the only issue

that is to be fought about. I think that... I would be rash to say very much about that here, given – how many of you are from states where there is absolutely nothing in terms of same-sex partnership protection...? OK... How many of you are from either states or countries where either marriage or a similar arrangement, is possible...? Ten years ago, who would have thought that those people are almost as many as the people for whom it's nothing? So, for us – for me at least, the question is this: what, what is going to be the shape, within the life of the church, of the committed relationships between people of the same sex? I always make a distinction – which in some countries may not need to be made – but which I think does need to be made for most of us, between whatever civil ceremony the law – in whichever state or country we live in, which – to be honest, from my point of view the easiest simply from the legal and technical point of view is marriage; why bother to invent a whole new category of law, but I can understand that that's what politicians do – except in Canada or in Spain, where they seem to have been saved the effort; or Belgium, as well... So the civil category is one thing, but I think that for us, if you like the vocational struggle to imagine what might be the shape of our partnerships being signs of the kingdom? What are we to call them? Of what are they going to be signs? How are we to celebrate them? It's not immediately clear, at any rate, that what in Latin languages is a word which derives from the office of motherhood – is necessarily the appropriate term within the religious sphere. *Matrimonio* – the *munus* of the *mater*. And that's not an argument against anything happening in the civil sphere. It's an argument for us imagining what might be the shape of the sign which we would hope to create in our societies. For me, this is a seriously arduous good, since I can't even successfully imagine having a partner, let alone sanctifying it in some way. Hopefully time will tell and I will get the wicked judge out of my head, or some blue prince will come and exchange places... ah you see, one asks for one [laughter] and abundance pours down. Does that, does that begin to answer...?

Q – You talked about being called to ministry, a call to exercise some ministry in the church; and yet forces talk about 'yes that's fine, but only if you lie, if you don't say certain things'. Personally – now you're talking about imagining things, what it would be like if we could do

ministry without having to compromise the truth, if we could speak the truth to power fully... I find myself in the situation of being called to ministry – we've moved to a very conservative parish in a small town, where the elephant in the front room is homosexuality, and never has the word been said in that parish. And yet I feel called to do something in that parish, but I feel like if I go to that parish, and immediately speak the full truth, not to lie, but to – to – talk about the love of God, which no-one can dispute, for all of us, and gradually work towards that day when we can speak the full truth... I wonder if you would comment on that, kind of incremental ministry to parishes, and whether or not you feel that is compromising the truth.

JA – well, I take it that we start, all of us, from the position of people who live with compromised truth. In other words, as it were, we're not innocents in a wicked world, we're hypocrites in a hypocritical world, and this is the human condition. So, yes, the question of how you help people identify an elephant in the room is, I think you're right, a very delicate one. But here's the point: if it really is an elephant in the room, then that means that an awful lot of people have already noticed it [quiet laughter]. The question is, how to let it be talked about – very gently – and you are going to be much wiser on that than I, in the circumstances. But one of the things which I think we shouldn't fear, is the ordinary common sense of a hugely significant number of the ordinary Catholic faithful. The vast majority of the Catholic faithful, so the surveys say, do not buy the hard line on this. They've all had to work through these issues. In other words, often it's surprising how much relief there is, even in apparently conservative places, when it appears that someone can just talk ordinarily, without making something a huge set-to argument. I think that that's, as it were, something that becomes possible when one is not predisposed to imagine a hostility greater than there is. Very often it's the case that the hostility is much less – in strange places, places you do not expect... I mean genuinely, places you do not expect... I doubt very much indeed whether the following little story would be completely unknown to some of the priests in this room, but I was thinking of a friend of mine, a priest in a very conservative parish, in a seriously Republican neighbourhood...? – was approached, a parish priest who had a very nice 'friend' who was often around in the parish, and the leader of

the ‘blue-rinse brigade’ [laughter] asked to speak to Father one day, and so he said yes, of course. And she sat him down and said, well, it’s about Tom, Father. Whereupon he froze – then she said, “the ladies and I have been talking” – he froze even more [laughter] – “please don’t leave us to go and be with Tom”. That’s all she wanted to say. That kind of thing, I think is – there’s far more common sense around, even in the midst of all the absurdities and wonders of our church life... sorry:

Q – yes, you’ve presented your three Hs and an M – I’m wondering if your second H, heart, may not be one of the central ones of really working through this, because as I look at – I – I’m going to tell you, I don’t know if I’m correct in doing this, about equating with scandal, homophobia, but internal homophobia as well, and the idea that – for instance, when I don’t let my heart work, when I don’t let my feelings go, I become cold, I become incapable of really having a home, and also of having a husband, or even having a ministry, and so wondering in terms of that, of, like, you know, those continually – conversion processes, dealing with my own scandal, internal homophobia, to allow my heart to really truly work.

JA – I think I – thank you for that. I think that’s exactly right. Now the reason I mentioned all four was because my own tendency has been to say, yes, I want a home, a heart, a husband, and ministry – but if not the other three then at least a heart. But what I really want to say is, that’s giving up, because part of having a heart is still wanting the other three, and that it’s important not to give that up. But I think you’re absolutely right: when we talk about scandal, we’re not talking about something outside us, that other people do to us – or even, necessarily, things which we do to other people. Of course we’re talking about that... we’re talking about things that are produced *within us*, as a result of the way we relate to other people. So you’re right, yes – it’s not just, if you like, that someone has done something to us, but that we find ourselves consenting and are involved in keeping alive what they have done to us as part of us, and it’s that which destroys the heart. Does that, does that... sorry, yes:

Q – Thank you for this day. My traditional Catholic education taught me that the two main purposes of the state of holy matrimony, were to

promote faithful intimate love, and secondly to protect the children. That ancient doctrine is still in place – is there not a sense in which we should as Catholics, traditional Catholics, be compelled to promote gay, lesbian, transgendered, marriage, not just civil union?

JA – well, if I can make the distinction which I made before... One of the things which, as gay and lesbian people, and indeed as Catholics, we cannot be removed from, is the notion of what I would call ‘sponsality’ – that the shape of all our lives should be seen within the programme of a marriage feast. Now, how same-sex couples are going to bear witness to that ‘sponsality’, I’m not yet sure. I don’t think we have, quote unquote, the matrimonial jurisprudence at hand, yet, for coping with that. Like you, I far prefer that whatever civil law we have, be marriage. I think it’s simpler, and more straightforward – but the *real* challenge, the real challenge is: how do we bear witness to God’s sponsality of us. That of which all marriage is supposed to be a sign – because that’s what we’re about. Does that begin to...? But I think that’s, in a sense, part of what the discussions tomorrow are all about, what the sacramentality, the shape of sponsality, in all our lives is supposed to be... Do you say ‘spousality’? [audience voice – ‘spousal’] Yeah, we would say spousal, but OK, I’m just being pompous and using Latin so as to make it sound grander [laughter]. Our Holy Father loves everything in Latin so we should....

Q – I’m wondering if you could be just a little bit more concrete about this idea of a renewed imagination – and specifically, is there anyone, or any group of people, or any organisation, you look to and you look at that group of people, that person and go, ‘you know, that inspires me to think in new ways, to have a new imagination’. Is there someone you could point us to, not so we can imitate them necessarily, but to kind of give a more concrete sense of what you mean by this freed imagination.

JA – well, not without being invidious to many of the people present. Because I think that there are many very fine examples of that, of that, here. And I think that one of things precisely that makes a group like this so interesting, is precisely the little flickers of sign coming together into something bigger, which we hope we’re celebrating here, as well as

being grateful for. But if you mean in the broad political sphere...? [near-inaudible response from questioner] Yes, yes, yes... gosh... Oh no, yes [laughter]. I would rather, if I might not, because so many of them would be known personally to people here, and I would feel that it's inappropriate to do that. But yes, suffice it say, there are people who do this, for whom little glimpses of what might be answers, do emerge in their lives, and I'm very very grateful when I see those. And in strange places, in strange places... One example which I can give, which is a story, a story which some of you will have read before, was in a book which came out, I don't know, twenty years ago, which was called *The Pink Triangle*... anybody read this; anyone remember it – yes... It was about the experience of what were in those days called homosexuals in the concentration camps in Germany, and one was a story about a priest from Bavaria I think, of a fairly aristocratic background, who was brought into this concentration camp, and he'd been accused of doing something with boys, whether this was true or not was never established, as, let's say, Nazi judicial process was not wonderfully clear – and he was treated even more abominably than other prisoners because of this by the camp commandant, people like that; and as he was beaten up, he kept on saying, 'they are not animals, they are not animals, they are not animals'. And on the last day when he was – on the last day of his life there was a roll call and he had to be present, and this was an account told by one of the survivors, they all had to stand in line, and of course he having been beaten up for exactly this reason was too weak to do that, so was standing half-crumpled and half-leaned against people in the camp, and one of them moved forward to strike him, and at that moment the sun broke through the clouds and shone on his face, and it was so completely destabilising to the camp commandant that he held back, and moved, didn't strike him, and everybody saw, everybody saw – the priest died later that afternoon, but everybody saw that it was the sun which had suddenly shone on this guy's face while he was being beaten up, that had held back the... But it's that sort of thing: 'they are not animals' – so, trying to imagine the good: that's the kind of thing that I'm talking about.

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