

On Wellbeing?

Wellbeing has to do with the interweaving of the psychological, the physical and the spiritual; it includes an element of how we inhabit our personal histories and how we negotiate these in our present; it depends upon our interrelationships with others – relationships which offer the possibility of harm and of flourishing – and finally, it involves questions of identity. Wellbeing must be about naming oneself, not being named by others; naming our limitations as we understand them, not as others do. And living with them, while also extending ourselves in ways that do not undermine our naming. Despite its fragility, human life is also amazingly resilient, tenacious and adaptable. We can be annihilated in an instant, but we can also survive against incredible odds, and transform the dreadful into the beautiful. The gospel conviction is that although terrible things happen, human wellbeing is a possibility. This is the stuff of love, mystery and miracles.

Wellbeing is not the same as health or happiness. You can have wellbeing even when ill or in pain, or when living with physical or mental disability. As one Christian minister puts it:

‘When people ask me how I am I often reply something like this: “I am well and I continue to live with pain...I trust that there is wellbeing and also health, but I live with pain that emerges from spreading degeneration within my spine.” As you know, I see what I have not seen before and discover what I may never have known before’.

The opposite of wellbeing is not illness, but dis-ease, in the sense of unease – being ill-at-ease with ourselves. Wellbeing is not the result of ‘cure’ but of the incremental building of networks of relationships and human connection, self-esteem, self-belief, purpose, meaning, value and good relationships. These tasks must be undertaken corporately, as well as individually. Health and wellbeing are not commodities to be bought, they are the fruits, for individuals and communities, of living well.