

As any good theologian should, this morning I am going to start and end not with an answer but yet another question, but this question also has lying within it a challenge, and that question is this:

What is it that you plan to do with your one, wild and precious life?

We all have one earthly life, precious and valuable - to God, and to those around us.

I find people truly mystifying. One of the many reasons which I chose to be ordained is for that fact. People are truly strange, truly wonderful, truly individual and above all truly strange.

All of us as strange, wonderful and individual people see the world in such weird and wonderful ways, and of course all of us live our one precious life, in ways which only make sense to us.

Those who come up here to this pulpit have such a privilege within this community. Not because we have a chance to be heard, but because we have the chance to be able to look so many people in the eye, and talk about life, talk about faith and talk about the world, knowing that all who hear will hear different things.

All who come in and out of this church, all who are a part of this community, have a different view of the world, experienced so many different things, and always have something new to offer us. Something to offer to our worship, our conversations and ultimately our theology and the way in which we see God.

Theology; the study of God, is vast. Because of course the study of the world, of God and of each other is always different when we look at it through different, angles or lenses.

When I studied Theology, I never studied straight theology, but I studied, **feminist** theology, lots of different **African** theologies, **environmental** theology, **black** theology, **systematic** theology and even **contextual** theology.

This morning I would like to talk about a particular theology that I personally think really pushed theology into what we know it to be today. And that is Liberation theology.

Now you cannot talk about Liberation Theology without talking about a man called Gustavo Gutiérrez. Gustavo Gutiérrez is a catholic priest who was born

in 1928 in Peru and is still alive at the age of 88. Gutiérrez grew up in Peru amongst poverty, oppression, state corruption and depravity.

Being ordained at the age of 30 Gutiérrez left his life as he knew it in South America and he underwent the usual theological education of a young Latin American man training for ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. He took what is often candidly called the Theological Grand Tour which included Belgium, France and Rome where he accumulated European theological wisdom. But of course what he learnt of theology in these privileged parts of Europe bore next to no relation to the deprivation of the South American reality which Gutiérrez was born into and found himself ministering.

Gutiérrez's spent some time lecturing in a South American Catholic University with his mind

“Seared by the unremitting reality of his people’s poverty, hopelessness and misery.”¹

And this in a nut shell is why we have liberation theology. Gutiérrez had to grapple with how it was possible

“To tell people that God providentially loves them and cares for them, when they are forced to feed stewed rat to their children, and compete with feral dogs to find food?”²

Gutiérrez was a priest who could not ignore the poverty that surrounded him. And being a man of great intellect and spirit, could not separate what he saw around him, from his theology and the way in which he saw God. It was the poverty in Peru that caused Gutiérrez to formulate a new method for theology that we now know as Liberation Theology.

Ultimately the way in which the privileged church impressed a theology onto the poverty of South America for Gutiérrez was just not working, and made no theological sense. And so Gutiérrez unearthed a theology that spoke to his people, he did it in quite a simple way, he listened.

He saw, heard and experienced what he and his people had to live through, and then reflected upon it with a discerning and prayerful heart, and as he read his theology, he preached that God has a preferential love for the poor.

¹ Philip Kennedy, *Twentieth-Century Theologians: A New Introduction To Modern Christian Thought*, (I.B. Tauris: 2010), p.228.

² *Ibid.*, p.228.

Through what he knew about Christ and what he knew about his context, he knitted the two together, to make a live theology. He gave his congregations a church, and a God who cared that they were suffering and wanted to do something about it. Gutiérrez amongst the deprivation of his context, didn't spout an ill-fitting western theology but spoke to them where they were.

Ultimately liberation theology finds itself rooted in action, and Gutiérrez found himself helping the poor in material and practical ways, because as he saw it, once he had knitted his context and his knowledge of God together what else would Christ do but feed the hungry, clothe the naked and feed the sick.

A key part of Gutiérrez's work which is still reverberating around the church today is how he did his theology. What the world church, and most certainly the Church of England has taken straight to its heart is a practice called Theological Reflection. Theological reflection finds its origins directly in liberation theology.

Gutiérrez's act of knitting together what he saw around him and what he knew of his theology is in a nutshell what reflecting theologically is.

Theological reflection is the act of looking at a situation or a context, praying about it, grappling with what we think we know of God and coming to a point where positive action is taken.

If we do church properly we are always reflecting theologically, always looking at where we are and what that means about our faith and what we do. And in fact this is a practice that this Church St John's is going to do quite explicitly as part of its advent course.

Without being too much of a sales pitch! If you take a leaflet as you go, you will see the four sessions, and they will follow the pattern of a theological reflection. We will start to explore what we do as church, what we value as a church what we feel is important in the life of the church, and we will explore, pray and discuss this and ultimately come to a point where we ask each other what to do. What it means to be a church, why we gather here week after week, and what it means to be a church that sits in the middle of Devises.

Now I opened with a question and I said I would close with one. But before I do, our gospel this morning concludes with a question also, "When the son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" And if we are to look at this through

the eyes of Gutiérrez and through the eyes of theological reflection, what faith means I think could be quite interesting.

We are not called to recite creeds, or be experts in theology to show our faith, but we are called to continually question, continually explore, and continually try to knit together our context with what we think we know of God, constantly trying to make sense of this strange and wild world, even if we drop a few stitches on the way.

So if we are wanting to try and learn from Gutiérrez we must be able to reflect upon our actions in this world in a way that moves us to act in a way that displays the love of God.

So, if we are trying to display the love of God in all we do as a church, to do justly love mercy and walk humbly with God, then what does that mean in action? What **do** we do, what **should** we do and what **must** we do to display the love of God to all in our community.

And here is our challenge... what do we, as a community plan to do, with our one wild a precious life, in order to display the love of God?