

Sermon Delivered by David Francis Darling  
at Essex Church, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2006

## Known But Not Wanted

One of my favourite streets in London, if not the world, is Old Compton Street in the heart of Soho. It's not a particularly beautiful street but it is a wonderful place to "people watch" - one of my favourite pastimes. And it certainly provides a wonderful array of people to watch.

Old Compton Street is now at the heart of London's gay village but it has always been at the heart of bohemian and alternative life. A couple of years ago my mother lent me a book written by a friend of hers who had grown up in Soho in the 1950s based on her life there at that time. It had the slightly risqué title of "Not all Tarts are Apple".

Every other Saturday I meet a friend for coffee and we spend an hour catching up on the gossip and people watching from a table on the pavement outside a small cafe. We always go to one particular cafe because it has those wonderful umbrella-like heaters which enable you to sit outside even in the depths of winter.

But the incident that started me reflecting on the thoughts I would like to share with you today didn't happen on a Saturday afternoon but late on a Friday night, about 10.30 when, on my way home, I decided to stop for coffee. But it was the outside heaters of the cafe that were the catalyst for a strange encounter with what I can only describe as an "angel" - no I hadn't been indulging in illegal substances prior to my coffee - there were no flowing white robes and certainly no wings but I'm sure it was one of those instances that St Paul talks about when he says that there are times when "we entertain angels unaware". In Judeo-Christian mythology, angels are simply messengers of God. I think of angels as people, real people, who usually unbeknown to themselves are messengers of God, revealers of the divine, those who enable me to see more of the truth of life - and the depth of life.

My angel was called Chris (it was only when I was writing this that I was struck by the appropriateness of his name - Christopher - the bearer of the Christ, the Anointed One). Anyway, he didn't look much like an anointed one, but a slightly dishevelled homeless man who was attracted not to me but to the heat of the gas fire above the table. We started to talk and when the waiters came to ask for his order and it was obvious he didn't have money for coffee I said "I'll have another coffee and one for my friend" and our conversation continued. It was when he was telling me about one of his encounters with the police that he gave me the title for this talk. He had been stopped by the police and they radioed the station with his details. The message came back on the radio that he was "known but not wanted".

Now at one level, this was good news for Chris - he was known to the police but not wanted for any arrestable offences - but the look in his eyes revealed that this simple little phrase seemed to sum up his life: "known but not wanted".

Perhaps because I felt uncomfortable with his pain I tried to make light of it - "Oh well, better to be known but not wanted than not known and not wanted" - but Chris just looked at me and then the conversation moved on.

But that phrase "known but not wanted" became almost like a mantra for me over the next few days and led me to reflect on the times when I might not want to be known in case being known leads me to being not wanted. Somehow being unknown and unwanted can feel like the better option - it can be seen as a neutral position - "I'm not particularly wanted by someone, or a group of people, but it's not that they have anything against me - it's simply that they don't know me - I'm not part of their group".

But is it simply a neutral state of being, not to be known, not to be recognised as a fellow human being?

A friend of mine once spent a couple of months living on the streets of London to try to gain some insight into what it feels like to be homeless and roofless. Of course he couldn't really experience it. He chose to be homeless, he had a home to go back to. He had friends and family "waiting in the wings" but it gave him a little insight into the situation.

He said that one of the worst things he experienced, and others have echoed this, was the feeling of being invisible. He very rarely had eye contact with another person. He was unknown and unwanted. He didn't feature in the life, in the story, of other people.

He told me that one of the consequences of this feeling of alienation, of being unconnected to the rest of society, was the temptation to steal. Not vast sums of money from a bank but apples or oranges from outside greengrocers. And not because

he was hungry - he said it was fairly easy to get food if you're homeless in London - but simply because the fruit was sitting there - he was outside of society and its norms and he was invisible! I'm pleased to say that his middle-class, law-abiding conscience prevailed, and he didn't give in to temptation but he said that he understood why others did.

This sense of alienation, of being unconnected to the rest of society is, I believe, the root of many of the problems in today's society. For it is only when we feel part of society, or part of any group, that we become aware of the responsibilities that we have as a result of belonging to that group.

I remember when, about 30 years ago, I was a student psychiatric nurse. Sometimes the work was emotionally draining, sometimes physically exhausting, sometimes very boring with little to do. There was a culture in the hospital of "having a sick day" when you couldn't be bothered going in. There was a sense that the institution would roll on without you and that it didn't really matter whether you were there or not. I took my fair share of "sick days". Unfortunately - or fortunately - I wasn't as anonymous as some of the other students as I was the student rep on the Hospital Education Committee. As I was leaving the committee room one afternoon, the Senior Nursing Officer - a lovely Irish man - said quietly to me "I notice you had quite a few individual sick days, David. I hope you won't have to take any more." I think I can honestly say that from that day to this I've had to be quite unwell before I would take any time off. I realised that my membership of the group gave me responsibilities to that group.

That's part of the message of Antony de Mello's story about the miraculous soup stone. The miracle of the stone was that it brought people together. It connected them to one another and together they were able to create something that individually would have been impossible. And what they created was much more than a delicious pan of soup. They created community. "Everyone felt strangely happy as they laughed and talked and shared their very first common meal."

There's also an interesting paradox in this story - in that it is the alien, the outsider, who is the catalyst for the creation of the community. And like a catalyst he remains unchanged, he doesn't become part of the community. He enables it to be created and then "in the middle of the merriment, the stranger quietly slipped away".

Perhaps a reminder to us that the "outsider", the "alien" can play an important role in any community or society and that paradoxically being an alien doesn't mean being alienated from the group but the alien can be the one that sees more clearly from the outside. The fool who reveals wisdom, the heretic who reveals the truth.

The outsider can be known as an outsider and yet still wanted as an outsider. Known and wanted.

For that is surely what we all want. To be known and wanted. Yet for many of us I believe that the fear of being not wanted prevents us from allowing ourselves to be truly and fully known.

And so we live behind our masks of respectability and acceptability. We play the part that we think other people want to see. But the problem is that often we are all playing parts - all playing the roles dictated to us by other people, and we never actually relate to each other honestly.

As most of you are aware I used to be an Anglican priest and a Friar. During this time I wasn't always able to see old friends as much as I would have liked but I kept in touch with several by post cards. When I left the order I discovered that often the post cards had been "role speaking unto role".

One friend, a nursing colleague, always sent me post cards of holy places she had visited and told me of the activities in her Anglo-Catholic Church. When I left I was slightly apprehensive about telling her as I thought she would be very shocked, especially about my shifting theological views. But I did write to her and was surprised when she, in turn, wrote that now in her 70s she was thinking of stopping going to Church as she didn't believe most of it any more. She had played the part of the pious parishioner to my part as holy priest. When I took off my mask she was able to remove hers.

My other friend would send me postcards of his travels around the world always signed simply "Paul". After I left, the cards were signed "Paul and Pete" (his partner). Despite the fact that he knew I was a gay man - we had met at a gay group in Cambridge 25 years ago - my "priestly mask" had prevented him from being open. His mask was responding to my mask.

In the extract I read from John Morgan's article he wrote - "I am finding that I need a spiritual community more than ever - not the Brand X Sunday Only Church but a dynamic, caring group of people who know me by name and travel the same road I do" - a caring group of people who know me by name.

To know me by name but not to give me a descriptive title - it's to know the real me, the me behind the mask - to know me and to still want me! Of course that level of acceptance is a two edged sword. Yes, it would be wonderful to feel that I can be truly known and still wanted, but am I prepared to really know each of you and still want you?

Yes, there is something comfortable and safe about masks, that's why we wear them. It can take courage to remove my mask and courage to face another person without their mask. And I'm certainly not advocating revealing everything about ourselves to everyone we meet. Masks developed for a good reason.

But I do believe that we need to be aware of the masks, know that they exist, be prepared to at least look behind our own masks. If we start with knowing and still wanting ourselves we can begin to risk knowing others. We can risk listening to the voice behind the mask - a voice that we may find resonates with our own. It may not be as clear, as strong, as certain as we think we would like. But in its weakness, tentativeness, uncertainty, it may be more authentic and it may echo more of my own language.

In another part of his article, John Morgan wrote: "I would appreciate a place where I could take my time to grow up spiritually. After two masters degrees and a doctorate from a Lutheran seminary I have come to the place in my life where I don't know much at all but I know this much - I need people around me who want me to grow. I wouldn't care if the community were six people or six thousand. Size is not the measure of spiritual depth."

It is, I believe, in communities like this that we can begin to be known and wanted, that we can be open to the voice of the outsider, that we can entertain angels unaware and that perhaps we can be challenged to know and want those who journey with us.