

# Living in a Material World

## Reading: Extract from Kathy Galloway's Essex Hall Lecture 'The Integrity of Creation' (1996)

I get really mad when I hear people say that we have got to get away from Materialism and get back to spiritual values. The two are one. The problem is not that we're too materialistic. The problem is that we are not materialistic enough. We do not love things enough; we do not love bodies enough; we do not love the ordinary enough, *for their own sakes*, for their intrinsic worth, not for their extrinsic utility. We need to love the stoneness of stone and the wateriness of water; the fleshiness of flesh and the bloodiness of blood. But spiritual and material ideologies of extrinsic worth feed on profound motivations of fear, on the avoidance of struggle, on the denial of pain and on the imprisonment of the imagination. These grow fat on the manipulation of alienated desire, drag people out of the dance of life which flows between a healthy self-love and a delighted other-love, and step in to fill the void. These substitute the narcotic effects of addictive lust for real, loving materialism... We take care of what we value. If we don't take care of it to the best of our ability it means that whatever we profess, we don't really value it. As people of faith, our conviction of the intrinsic worth of the creation flows from our conviction about the value of the Creator, about the goodness of God. The creation is an expression of the creative love of God, who has created it, redeemed it and sustains it. As part of that creation, we know ourselves also to be valuable and valued – not perfect, not flawless, but precious and loved as we are.

## Address:

The meditation that we followed earlier on spoke of us not being our bodies, our minds, our emotions – we have bodies, we have minds, we have emotions – but they are not who we are. The exercise comes from a book by Italian Robert Assagioli, founder of Psychosynthesis, a form of therapy that recognises a spiritual dimension in life – a sense that we humans are more than just physical beings. And this of course has been the message from many spiritual teachers throughout the ages – that one of the potential pitfalls of being human is a tendency to over-identify with the material world in which we live.

But it's understandable that we do, isn't it. We live in these physical bodies of ours – they greet us in the mirror first thing in the morning, they're with us all day long, they give us frequent sensations of pleasure or pain, they transport us through each day and indeed through the journey of our entire life, from birth to death. And these bodies go through assorted changes along the way – as any quick flick through an old photo album can remind us.

It's interesting then to think of some extreme religious practices where people have sought to renounce the body, have treated themselves harshly in order to go beyond bodily desires and bodily identification. Mortification of the flesh appears throughout the history of Christianity for example as does the ascetic tradition in eastern religions with its practice of extreme physical austerities – practices designed to help the practitioner attain spiritual enlightenment through breaking the identification with the human body - and all its delights. The story that we heard earlier on of Jeevan's second pair of trousers and all that then followed as he accrued more and more material possessions - on one level this story appears to be a warning about the dangers of having too many material possessions. "Watch out!" it says – "the path of materialism is a slippery slope – get yourself a second pair of trousers and before you know it you'll have a house and farm and a hundred and one other things to look after".

But there is another way of interpreting this story. The wandering teacher told Jeevan to live simply and to avoid possessions. But perhaps that was not the best path for Jeevan to take. Maybe his best path was to become a father and a farmer and a landowner - maybe that was what he needed to do, and do to the best of his ability. Maybe there is a way for each of us to live well in this material world of ours and I would suggest that perhaps the first step is that we strive to know ourselves – so that we might understand and, therefore, better fulfil the unique gifts that we bring into this life. There it was, written above the portal of the oracle at Delphi in ancient Greece – 'Know Thyself', and echoed again by Shakespeare in that great line 'to thine own self be true'.

In the process of getting to know ourselves, most of us come to realise that it is not our path to renounce the material world and if we are not to renounce it and turn away from it then we can turn to embrace it instead. As Kathy Galloway reminded us in the reading we heard earlier on, we sometimes do not love this material world of ours enough - we do not respect and care for our bodies, our possessions, one another, or our planet earth home. It is alright to celebrate what it is to be human and to enjoy the pleasures that life brings. Do you remember the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart's saying that if you were to utter only one prayer in life 'Thank You' would suffice.

Let's spend a moment now thinking of what in our material world we give thanks for and then I invite people to shout out if you wish – what are you grateful for?

All these things we are grateful for (love, breathing, gardens, good food, art, music, touch, laughter) – and in order to be grateful we have to stay aware and awake – we have to not take anything for granted. Yet it is so very human to take things for granted. How often have we only realised and appreciated what we had when it is taken from us – be that physical health and the freedoms that brings, be that the presence of someone we love.

So gratitude and awareness and self exploration are useful skills for living in the material world, particularly as one of the interesting features of the physical realm is the tendency towards clutter. I'm not going to use the example of my own living space as an illustration because it is too extreme an example. There is something strange about me – some weird magnetic force that clearly emanates from me – that draws towards me endless pieces of paper and books – and bringing all these papers and books into any kind of order is clearly beyond my present skills. Does anyone else have this problem? (*seek a show of hands*)

Or are you the opposite? Do you have advanced skills in filing and sorting and putting things on shelves?  
Do you collect things or give them away?  
Do you keep things just in case they come in handy or because they remind you of something or someone?  
Are you someone who seeks beauty and harmony in your surroundings?  
Do you have the skills to build or create in a physical form – an artist or crafts person perhaps?

Knowing who we are and how we relate to the physical realm is a useful source of self understanding. But to understand ourselves and indeed others we have to step beyond praise or blame – the 'oh I'm so good at this or bad at that' response – and rather choose to explore what is going on beneath the surface of our cluttered or ordered lives. And to engage in that level of self-exploration it is good to get away for a while, to take a step back in order to reflect. "Who am I? How do I live? What does my life show about me and my passions, my motivations, my values? What do I consider to be of ultimate worth?" This is the life that Greek philosopher Socrates was encouraging his students towards when he told them that an unexamined life is not worth living. "Look deeper," Socrates was saying, "look deeper into yourself, reflect for a while and then step back into the world". French theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin described it thus

*"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience".*

That's maybe true and maybe not – who knows? But I know that I like this idea that the whole of life might be some kind of experiment – the purpose of which is to learn and to understand through close observation and through trial and error. One of the main sources of learning for us is this physical body we inhabit and this physical world that is our home. And on this experimental path there are guides who have taken similar routes before us.

This week in our Building Your Own Theology group we've been listing our Ethical Commandments for 21st century life and high on our list was Gandhi's suggestion that we "live simply that others might simply live". Henry David Thoreau, one of the founders of the Transcendentalist movement expressed it well I think when he wrote "Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify."

In a book called *Thoreau as Spiritual Guide*, the Rev Barry Andrews writes that this commitment to an existence of calm simplicity arose because Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists were "troubled by the changes they saw (in society)... (and so) tried to achieve a balance in their lives between work and leisure, nature and civilization, society and solitude, spiritual aspirations and moral behaviour."

Does that ring a bell with you? Isn't that search for balance in our lives perhaps what many of us are here for today at Essex Church? This is a busy and materialistic world, we live lifestyles that can at times seem overwhelming in their demands and complexities. We face uncertainties and sometimes too many choices, we stand at turning points where nothing is quite clear. Yet most of us are probably not people who want to turn away from this busy world completely, nor renounce the pleasures of living in a material world. Instead we can learn to embrace life more fully, to love and appreciate precious moments, precious people, precious places, precious things – yet hold them lightly:

Holding on lightly – words echoed by poet Mary Oliver with whose words I will end this address –

*"To live in this world you must be able to do three things  
To love what is mortal,  
to hold it against your bones  
knowing your own life depends on it  
And when the time comes to let it go  
To let it go".*

And to that I say amen.

## **Closing Blessing:**

Let us love this world of ours for all that it gives us  
Let us recognise our lives as a precious gift  
And may we know when best to hold on and when best to let go  
For the greater good of all.  
Go well and blessed be.