

## The Golden Lecture 2018

### Self-awareness, self-absorption and the Common Good: the challenge of the individual in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Master, Wardens, distinguished guests:

**I: “No man is an island...”**

As we give thanks for the far-sighted generosity of the Haberdasher William Jones in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, founder of the annual Golden Lecture, I hope it will not be thought of amiss by the Haberdashers present and their distinguished guests if I begin this year’s lecture with the words of the son of a member of the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers - clearly a vastly inferior guild, albeit still one of the Great Twelve Livery Companies here in the City of London!

This ‘son of an ironmonger’ was a near contemporary of William Jones - their lives overlapping by some 43 years in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. And like Jones, this ‘son of an Ironmonger’ had Welsh ancestry – his father family coming from Carmarthenshire. But by the time William Jones might have encountered him (and although I think there is no evidence to say they did meet, I love to think that somewhere in the City of London of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century they may meet, albeit probably at a distance, across a crowded room or nave), John Donne – for that is his name - sometime Dean of St Paul’s, was well on his way to being part of the London Establishment even as William Jones departed London for Hamburg, there to make that fortune for which today we are so grateful.

And the words are these, familiar – I suspect – to most of you:

*No man is an island,  
entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the continent,  
a part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less,  
as well as if a promontory were.  
as well as if a manor of thy friend’s  
or of thine own were.  
Any man’s death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind;  
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
it tolls for thee.<sup>1</sup>*

Some writers<sup>2</sup> have chosen to read this poem within the context of the court politics of John Donne’s age, as the coded warning of a well-intentioned courtier to the young Prince Charles, Later Charles I,

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<sup>1</sup> Meditation XVII from ‘Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, and severall steps in my Sicknes’ by John Donne, published 1624.

as his father James VI and I lay sick in bed, against failing to heed the consequences of unilateral action... 'No man is an island... even a Prince, and all actions have consequences.' (How marvellous to be able to write political advice in such a subtle way that it is so coded that, if events don't go the way you'd hoped, your position is entirely deniable – a lesson for our current Foreign Secretary!) But the majority of scholars see nothing of politics in these words, and simply note that 'Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, and severall steps in my Sicknes [sic]' (the full title of the Book from which the poem comes – it is Meditation 17 from the collection) represent not oblique political comment or advice, but rather the deep existential reflection of a human being in a critical moment of mortal danger... Lying delirious and fearful on his bed, John Donne is – they suggest – cast deeply into introspection on the meaning of it all, as those who are sick often are. The miracle of this reflection of Donne's, is that for all his experience in his bed of pain of fear and isolation, his assertion is about the essential connectedness of life, even *when* our experience of it is one of radical isolation. A lonely and isolated man sees only connection.

At any rate, whichever the poem's original meaning, it elegantly – and eloquently – sets out the theme I want to explore in this year's Golden Lecture: the tension for individuals between isolation and connectedness, and the psychological puzzle that means that when we *are* aware of our selves (and of course we are not always so aware), this awareness can push us in one of two directions: either, towards a healthy self-awareness that gives us a proper sense of who we are and engenders a sense agency to shape the world and to be part of a bigger picture connected to others, or, towards a fruitless self-absorption that makes us feel radically disconnected from one another and incapable of shaping our world.

And if that all feels a bit 17<sup>th</sup> century and metaphysical, well, my thesis is that it is this latter and profoundly negative experience of individualism that is the besetting problem of our modern age, and so this question of the difference between self-awareness and self-absorption is fundamental to working for the common good 300 or so years after Donne's meditation was written – and recognition of this ought to provoke a response in us, not least as Institutions like great Livery Companies and the Church.

## **II: Isolation: merely a 21<sup>st</sup> century issue?**

It is a popular idea and a common perception that individualism is on the rise and is a real and growing problem. Ask the average member of the populace what the signs of this are and why it is happening – and the likely response is likely to include two themes: technology and youth. There is a widely held view that it is merely a characteristic of the modern age and that because of the younger generation. The corollary of this is that we (whoever we happen to be) in our generation had an eye for community – and society – and connection... it is just these youngsters, with their obsession with their iPhone screens and headphones who have begun to be radically cut off from society and from each other.

I think the true picture is slightly more complex than this.

'Millennials' (that is those born, broadly, between the years 1980 and 2000) *do* connect to the world of thought, to each other and to the trajectory of life in a distinctive way. A journey on public transport – a glance around the auditorium in the interval of any play or musical – or just a walk down any London street at the time of the daily commute, reveal that instead of talking to each other, or sitting in contemplation of the world around, we rapidly seek refuge in the isolated world

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<sup>2</sup> Gray, Dave; Jeanne Shami (1989). "Political Advice in Donne's Devotions". *Modern Language Quarterly*. Duke University Press. 50/4 ISSN 0026-7929.

of the individual screen. But it's not just Millennials, and they at least have developed the skills of being able to watch and walk at the same time! (I don't know if you've ever stopped to wonder at the apparently innate skills that allow them never to look up from their devices, and yet leave the tube at precisely the right stop, negotiate a packed platform and crowded escalator and swipe out of a station without missing a second of what they're watching while missing each other: it is the older generation (Generation X, my own generation – born between 1960 and 80) that struggles with this and causes pedestrian collisions). Interestingly last night, at a Fitting Out Dinner at a well-known London Yacht Club where the dominant demographic cohort was the Baby Boomers (born between 1940 and 60) with a few from the so-called 'silent generation' (those born between 1920 and 40), the brief pause and comfort break after the Loyal Toast saw many rush to get out their phones to check texts (and possibly to Google the person they'd been sitting close to); it seems that whereas ten years ago such behaviour would have been unthinkable in London Club Land, now as long as you don't speak – you can use phones or handheld devices with impunity. Everyone's doing it.

So, although our sense is that the privatisation of communication and a retreat into a private and radically individualised world is a symptom of life in the rising generation, we are all at it. It's not just Millennials - the 'me, me' generation.

This of course isn't merely retreat into isolation. The ubiquity of Social Networking Sites (like Facebook, that has been so much in the news these past few days) means that we are – even as we retreat into our little screens – sharing (often involuntarily apparently) our data (something we clearly need to wake up to) and also sharing experiences. However, beyond the dangers of being manipulated through big data analysis, psychologists<sup>3</sup> are also aware that the use of Social Media Sites correlates closely to a rise in sub-clinical narcissism: our sharing is not always egalitarian; it is not merely chat between us and our friends; rather, it can be a device for us to aggrandise ourselves, an exercise in self-presentation: we show people what we *want* them to see of us, and so under the guise of connecting, we are actually often posturing and being competitive with each other. 'See where I've been; see how privileged my world view is.'

Millennials may well inhabit a different world of expectations about career trajectory and commitment (those recruiting millennials find – often with a sense of frustration - that in equal measure they seem to be committed idealistically to making a difference and also to making a difference for self, that they expect to stay in a role not for life, nor even to have a second journey after a decent length of time on the first, but rather expect to chop and change on the basis of how they *feel* about what they're able to give and to get out of it.) Whither loyalty? This is, of course not universally true: some Millennials still have ambitions to join professions and to work hard and consistently to succeed and progress in conventional or at least familiar ways – but with the universal expectation of a gap year has come a set of expectations among the many that the world of work will always be fulfilling and that it must have some vocational quality to it and be a good fit. 'It wasn't like that in our day!' 'It is,' we say with some frustration, 'just another expression of their self-containedness, their over-developed capacity for self-referencing, self-absorption or isolationist existence.'

But as I say, it *isn't* as simple as that. Some of you will have read Robert Putnam's paper from 1995 or the highly popular book<sup>4</sup> that it issued in some five years later, *Bowling Alone*. It is a wonderful

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<sup>3</sup> Millennials, narcissism, and social networking: What narcissists do on social networking sites and why - Shawn M. Bergman , Matthew E. Fearrington a , Shaun W. Davenport , Jacqueline Z. Bergman

<sup>4</sup> *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Robert Putnam (Simon & Schuster Ltd, New York, 2001)

title and a good and provoking read. The book is a study of the erosion of social capital in America. The title says it all concisely: whereas in the 1930s and 40s, people were more gregarious and socially committed to spending time with their friends, now often people go bowling alone – a metaphor for the reduction in all forms of inter-person social engagement ‘upon which Americans used to found, educate, and enrich the fabric of their social lives.’ And Putnam’s point – which is what makes the book fascinating – is that this reduction in and erosion of social connectedness undermines active civil engagement, and that in turn undermines democracy. Putnam discusses ways in which Americans have disengaged from political involvement and notes decreased voter turnout, decreased public meeting attendance, less service on committees and fewer people working with political parties. And he also notes Americans’ growing distrust in their government. And whereas he accepts the possibility in the book that this lack of trust might be attributed to ‘the long litany of political tragedies and scandals since the 1960s’, in the end his diagnosis is that this explanation (namely that it is cynicism in an electorate weary of the clay feet of politicians) is only a tiny part of a much bigger picture of social trends – much of which has to do with the impact of technology “individualizing” our leisure time via television, the Internet, and eventually virtual reality helmets. In Putnam’s day these helmets were as much science fiction as science fact, but they’re now widely available in our high street shops.

So, it is not just millennials: it is us too, potentially, if we can extrapolate from this American study to British and Western European culture (and I think we are safe to do so, with some caveats – whereas we would be less secure in doing so if we were to try to map Putnam’s insights onto different and more fundamentally communitarian societies, such as those in Eastern Europe, China, Japan and the East – although, of course with globalisation, who knows, it may only be matter of time!)

In a notable build on and critique of *Bowling Alone*, Everett Carl Ladd (an American sociologist) claims that Putnam fails to note that existing field studies from even earlier show this same drift – but blame the radio (the wireless) for it – long before television and video games, still less hand-held devices.

And so it *may* be that our drift into individualisation, and the erosion of social capital, began much earlier than we imagined. It’s not just these ‘wretched millennials!’ And lo, to my delight, I discovered that a major academic study – again based on sampling and analysis in America, not the UK – supports this. In Igor Grossmann and Michael Varnum’s research article *Social Structures, Infectious Diseases, Secularism and Cultural Change*<sup>5</sup> – a marvellous apparent catch-all of a title! – the authors argue that in fact on eight scales of individualism and collectivism we have been becoming more individualised, and increasingly radically so, for at least 150 years: in terms of shared patterns of attitude, preferences, values and social instincts, we have been moving, on scales of individualism-socio-centrism, *Gesellschaft-Gemeinschaft* and independence-interdependence (label them as you will) [we have been moving] steadily and consistently towards individualism: with a focus on personal self, an emphasis on uniqueness (as opposed to conformity), and increasingly weak ties to family and wider social structures.

This is – in fact – a really fascinating study: it looks at ‘cultural products’ – the way, for example, in which individualist and collectivist language and themes are reflected in books over the past 150 years; it looks at behavioural patterns of uniqueness (with a fascinating study of baby naming – noting the huge increase in desire not to follow the crowd, but to invent new, highly individualised

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<sup>5</sup> Grossmann, I., Varnum, M. E. W. (2015). Social structure, infectious diseases, disasters, secularism, and cultural change in America. *Journal of Psychological Science*, vol. 26, pp.311–324

names for our children – which, if you're an Anglican parson, explains a great deal when it comes to the bizarre and invented names parents these days seem to be happy to give their children!); and it looks at some more familiar demographic indicators such as family size, percentage of single-person households and multigenerational households, and divorce rates... And to test these socially-chosen factors as indicators of a trend towards individualism, the authors also consider socio-ecological factors too: the prevalence of certain infectious diseases, and the demographics of urbanisation and population density, the growth in secularism and even people's decision to define their religious affiliation as 'none' or 'no answer'. Their conclusion, from analysis of a plethora of varied sources – is that it isn't just Millennials who experience radical individualisation; nor is it even just society since the 1980s, or the 1960s - nor even from WW2 or even WW1... Our march into increased individualism, and social individualisation (the atomisation of society and the erosion of social cohesion, a reduction in our general connectedness one with another – measured in terms both of cultural shifts (that is choice) and in terms of exogenous (that is externally caused) socio-ecological factors) has been gradual and steady for 150 years.

There are two things to say about this. The first is about the timescale of the change. The second is about the correlation between this individualisation and the experience of isolation.

### **III: Boiling the frog**

First, the gradual drift. I've always liked the metaphor of boiling the frog. You're familiar with it, I'm sure. They say (though this is a better metaphor than it is a scientific experiment!) that if you drop a frog into hot water, the frog will quickly and instinctively leap out. Whereas if you put the same frog into cold water in a saucepan and very slowly heat the water, the frog will be unaware of the very gradual change and will, eventually, be boiled to death.

The point, that when cultural change is gradual enough, we – effectively – sleep through it. We notice things that change rapidly, and we react... but with an almost imperceptibly slow but steady drift over a century and a half, what chance have we of noticing what is going on?

This is not change on the surface: it is the slow shift of societal tectonic plates – and because when we do notice symptomatic changes (like suddenly everyone on the tube wearing headphones and staring into screens) we tend to 'blame it on the younger generation', we are – for the most part – unaware of the most enormous change in *our* experience of life *over many generations*...

We have sleep walked into a new world – a world of radical atomisation – in which, I would suggest, many of the presenting social issues of the day are themselves symptoms of this deeper shift in society. That's the first thing: that the world as we know it has changed in a century and a half, beyond recognition.

The second thing to say is that this experience makes sense of a rising crisis in social care – and here, finally, there is ample data in a series of reports on social isolation in the United Kingdom. The experience and the crisis have to do with loneliness and isolation.

The terms social isolation and loneliness are often used interchangeably, though there are several important distinctions to be made between them. Because of an awareness of a need to engage what it a real social problem, in the field of research, definitions of each are becoming standardised: *social isolation* is defined as 'an objective state determined by the quantity of social relationships and contacts between individuals, across groups and communities.' Social isolation can be caused physically through distance or disability, or emotionally through social stigmas or traumatic events – and may quietly be being created by a steady shift in our culture. *Loneliness*, on the other hand, is 'a

*subjective* state based on a person's emotional perception of the number and/or quality of social connections they need compared to what is currently have.' It follows therefore, that it is possible for an individual to be socially isolated without feeling lonely, or to feel lonely without being socially isolated, but the two conditions are often found together due to the similar factors that contribute to their development.

Why are we becoming better at defining these terms more precisely? Well, in part because we are increasingly aware of their impact on health and wellbeing. Research by Julianne Holt-Lunstadt in 2010 on social connectedness and its impact on mortality showed that, in terms of negative health outcomes, lacking social connections is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and has worse health outcomes than risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity. It has been calculated that loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26% in older people. In a 2013 study, The Future Foundation reported that the overall number of older people reporting loneliness in the UK is expected to rise by 40%, from 5.25m today to 7m by 2030. And while issues of loneliness and isolation are most often discussed in relation to older people,

report after report – often by charities seeking to care for different sectors in society – note that the problem and the challenge is not *confined* to the elderly.

Young mothers – although the birth of a child often presents new opportunities for making connections with others at the same stage in life, experience isolation. The charity Family Action found that 20% of expectant mothers lack a supportive social environment to help them through their pregnancy (a percentage that rises in low income households.) And because mothers without supportive social environments have been seen to suffer from increased levels of depression, and because there is a growing body of evidence linking maternal depression to impaired early child development, social isolation and loneliness among expectant mothers has the potential to transfer disadvantage *across generations*.

Among children, social isolation and loneliness are often linked to bullying – which, even if attitudes among the young to social stigma around, for example sexuality and gender identity are more liberal (that is what people are often bullied about, after all), bullying itself seems to be a fixed feature of playground life – and it often issues in isolation. Children who experience sustained social isolation and loneliness typically have lower educational outcomes, as well as higher rates of smoking and obesity in adulthood. And then there are our so-called young carers who experience heightened levels of social isolation and loneliness due to stress and anxiety brought about by their caring responsibilities. The 2011 census reports that there are nearly 178,000 carers aged between 5 and 17 in England and Wales.

Many young adults too – some, though a decreasing number, of course, leaving home - have been shown to experience isolation and loneliness. Those who go into work experience the lottery of redundancy and instability in the workplace, and for many the contemporary work environment and the socio-technical assumptions we have made about productivity and the necessity for work of sitting in front of a screen and working longer and longer hours result in the experience of being lonely even when surrounded by fellow workers. Those who fall out of work (or who never get into it) can become isolated and lonely too. A report on social networks produced by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce (RSA) found that 50% of unemployed people were, by their definition, socially isolated. And those who remain in work but then have families often find that the pressures of balancing work and family life (many of course go part time to share in child care) result in disconnection and isolation from peers. And as those of us who run London churches with – often – meetings of 12 Step Groups to support those addicted to either

alcohol or drugs (and use of both is hugely common in 21<sup>st</sup> century urban society) know that addiction itself can, even with the intervention of support groups for those who seek them out (and of course many don't), result in isolation and an extreme sense of loneliness that only has the effect of reinforcing isolating behaviour.

What point am I trying to make? Simply this: that whereas we sometimes notice isolation in the elderly and the bereaved, we are in fact in the grip of a huge crisis of isolation and loneliness which stretches across the whole of society. And that shift towards a culture in which this experience of isolation and loneliness thrives has been such a gradual one that we've hardly noticed it. As we approach the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are – effectively – in the grip of a huge social crisis of which – other than by occasionally noticing some of its symptoms – we are largely oblivious.

### **V: Most-pressing social need of the day...**

And where do I want to go with this observation? Well, perhaps simply here: that whereas our instinct – when we remember – is to approach isolation as just *one* presenting social need among *many*, it is – in fact – the primary one... it is just that its onset has been so subtle, so insidious, that have failed to notice the fundamental difference it has made to our societal well-being and the way we relate – or fail to.

*Isidewith.com* was set up in 2012 as a non-partisan and entirely independent organisation to monitor perceived social needs and current issues. Through online polling daily, they receive, every single day, over a million unique answers to the question what it is that is occupying our hearts and minds as engaged citizens and politically attuned individuals. Their findings are categorised by political affiliation, country, city, and referral website. It is an instantaneous way of having a finger on the pulse of the world's online community. (Happily, they exist not to use large data to shape behaviour – but the reverse, to monitor behaviour to give it a shape – so that we can notice how we are – what is keeping us awake – what makes us sit up and take notice, or what makes us get up and try to make a difference.) Depressingly, half an hour spent perusing their insights reveals that we, in the UK, are concerned with the following issues (in an approximate order of priority): homelessness, immigrant assimilation, street violence and gun and knife use; NHS privatisation, human rights, LGBT Marriage and Brexit. Isolation, radical individualisation and loneliness don't get a look in – and although mental health is a concern, *it* tends to be addressed and looked at through the prism of NHS funding, while depression (which *is* another concern) is looked at through the prism of prescription costs. Is this because my thesis – that isolation is our besetting problem and the one underlying many others – is wrong? No, I believe that it is simply that we have sleep walked into a crisis that is so vast in its extent that it has subtly subverted our language, our expectations, our very ability to notice its malign presence at the very core of our experience of life. And it is time to wake up.

## **VI: Depression, social interaction and anti-depressants.**

One of the most impactful books I've read in a long time is by the British writer and social commentator Johann Hari. Its title is *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions*<sup>6</sup>.

It begins with a story about his visit to his doctor when young to confess to the doctor that he was experiencing bleak, dark feelings and was struggling to cope. 'That's ok' - he relates – 'the doctor told him: you're merely suffering from a lack of a chemical in your brain – serotonin. It's not your fault – some people produce enough, others don't – and lo and behold, there's a tablet I can give you that will increase your level.'

Hari describes the experience of what he calls this 'chemical kiss' that at once made him feel a little better, not because of the neuro-chemistry, but because – as he says – there is nothing more powerful than being given a story that make sense of your pain, and especially one that says it is not your fault. The improvement wasn't sustained. He came back and his dosage was increased. And then increased again until he was on the maximum dose – at which level he stayed for 13 years. He was one of millions of us – as many as 1 in 11 of us in the UK – who are on anti-depressants. The statistics tell us that 1 in 10 of us will experience depression at some stage in our lives; that 4% of children between 5 and 16 years old are anxious or depressed; and that the problem is not reducing, only increasing. Depression is a growing problem, with up to 10 times more people suffering from the condition now than in 1945<sup>7</sup>. Can this just be due either to better reporting or to a sudden societal dip in a brain chemical?

Hari's book goes on to recount his own dissatisfaction with the knee-jerk pharmaceutical response of doctors, and his subsequent research into communities where this trend seemed not to be so established. His researches – (and this book is wonderfully cheering to read) – took him into the heart of an Amish Community (those characteristic Anabaptist Christians who shun modern technology and cherish familial connections); and into communities of disconnection which, for a variety of reasons, had come together and discovered the possibilities of social reconnection – (there is a fantastic account of a sink estate in Berlin, inhabited historically by mutually suspicious Muslim immigrants, gays and unemployed and poor Germans who were brought together by a social incident and found like transformed) and of places of work (like the fascinating account of the Baltimore Bicycle Company) where slavish and isolating hierarchy in the organisation, and lack of autonomy, was replaced by a cooperative system of mutual accountability which not only made the business more profitable but transformed the lives of those working there. In all these places depression was alleviated, not by tablets but by connection.

Hari's assertion is that the knee-jerk pharmaceutical response to depression is a poor and unimaginative solution to a widespread crisis in mental health that is really rooted in something much deeper than neuro-chemical imbalance (indeed of which, reduced serotonin may well in many cases be a symptom and not a cause): namely radical individualisation, isolation, loneliness and lack of connection.

The World Health Organisation recently said that mental health is largely produced socially – and that mental ill-health is largely a social indicator.

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<sup>6</sup> *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression – and the Unexpected Solutions* by Johann Hari, Bloomsbury Circus, London 2018

<sup>7</sup> Seligman, M. E. P. In J. Buie (1988) 'Me' decades generate depression: individualism erodes commitment to others. *APA Monitor*, 19, 18.



Over 150 years we have sleep-walked into a new world; we are now more highly individualised than ever before; we see the signs in casual social behaviour – and what is not to like about an iPhone or the ability to be able to connect to anyone, anywhere. But the paradox is that our apparent ability to connect, belies an alarming disconnection, and the real cost of that we are only just beginning to notice. The answer is not pills. Is not chemistry... it is reconnection.

## **VII: Donne's miracle and the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church.**

Back to where we started.

*No man is an island,  
entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the continent,  
a part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less,  
as well as if a promontory were.  
as well as if a manor of thy friend's  
or of thine own were.  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind...*

As he lay on his bed of pain, what was it that pushed John Donne into a sense of his connectedness rather than into the despair of disconnection and isolation? Was it just chance? Perhaps his neuro-chemistry? Who knows? We can only speculate.

But I wonder whether part of the miracle that enabled him to glimpse the connectedness of things was his theological world-view – the story he had learned about the nature of creation as something created by a God who is, in himself, relational – and whose Trinitarian nature makes inevitable and unavoidable connectedness in a world and in human beings created in his image.

For Donne, radical disconnection and isolation would have seemed as hellish (literally) as it would ultimately impossible – because the mind of the world and its deep structures were informed by a God of love and of connection... Donne – even in the grip and fear of death – consistently said none other than that it is in our nature to be in relationship. I am involved – ontologically – in mankind because I am made in the image of God.

Don't we need a better narrative of connection?

For the Church, I believe, that is a recovery of its confidence in the story of a Trinitarian God of connection. I have to say that I am concerned that the Christian Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has lost its theological confidence and has gone native: that it has bought into the world of individualism as the whole of Western Society has drifted in that direction. We are – I think – guilty of presenting Church life as just one of many distractions or pastimes in a world of entertainment; we place our faith in apps and websites to connect us as individuals to an anonymous whole; we pour huge effort into supporting people in their individual spiritual journeys ('my relationship with my God'); we lay on courses to develop people as *individual* disciples... We have begun to set criteria for ordained ministry and through a process of review to embed a culture of continuous reflection and improvement, (which is a good thing) except that a glance at the criteria reveals that – as in most of the working world – the objectives we set are individualistic goals rather than goals that have any

ambition for groups or communities. We tend to view the task of societal transformation as secondary to the task of running healthy and viable attractive congregations, and the work of social outreach and social programmes as a distraction from the true heart of things.

This should not surprise us, entirely, because we are just caught up in a slow drift towards a very different and highly individualistic way of conceptualising society – but though it should not surprise us, it ought to give us cause to ask some deep questions about our priorities. The call to arms is to all of us: to the church, certainly, and to great institutions that have the opportunity to shape society – like wealthy livery companies.

We find ourselves – I would suggest – living in a world in which huge numbers of people are isolated and lonely, longing for reconnection, and in which many of the presenting societal issues we face could and would be addressed by the simple act of weaving people into community and connection. This is not secondary to our calling – it lies at its very heart. Above all, whatever other stories we tell of connection, we need to recover our faith in a Trinitarian God of relationship whose call to us, in Christ, is not to isolation but to love and to connection.

Alan Gyle

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Given at St Bartholomew the Less,  
City of London.