

something greater?

During his three-day visit to Cambridge in February, Rowan Williams used a public address to invite listeners into a larger world

You can tell the two men in dog collars moving warily towards the back of a packed Great St Mary's Church in Cambridge are not relishing the challenge of a bouncers' role this evening. But a 60-something-year-old heckler, leaning from the public gallery directly over the pulpit about to be occupied by the Archbishop of Canterbury, is loud, angry and not about to shut up.

It is hard to imagine how our de facto security staff will reach the offending gentleman and drag him from the building without risking a 2005 Labour Party conference-style "elderly heckler bundled out" debacle. On the other hand, how will Rowan Williams, already ravaged by a merciless couple of weeks in the media, make himself heard if they don't?

Duly introduced, the archbishop does not wait for a more conducive environment to unfold. He strides to the pulpit and plunges into a discourse on the basic nature and appeal of the Christian Gospel, which seems rapidly to calm his critic, and mesmerise most of the crowd.

We are "puzzled, frustrated, even haunted by the idea that maybe what we see is not the whole story," he suggests, and asks: "What if my perception is not the measure of everything?" It is always hard to cut through our distractions to focus on questions like this, but when we do an understanding of one's own relative powerlessness sits among the more dazzling implications. As Dr Williams points out, this is the very instinct that can lend itself to faith. "Religious feeling is based on a sense of human limitation or human weakness - to be human is not necessarily to be in control of things."

What do we do with this sense of limitation? Either of two things it seems; one leading us to "terrible religion" if any, and one to faith. "Terrible religion happens when we pretend we are in charge, that we are at the centre, that our limits can be overcome, that we have access to all truth and we know what the world is like. This is a terrible way to be human too. It is a way of teaching us to ignore what is real."

By contrast, he argues, one test of faith is whether it stops you ignoring things, and rather opens your eyes to uncover a world that you recognise cannot be fully seen, either by you or by anyone else. Faith is about inhabiting that larger world, which has a "depth not sounded".

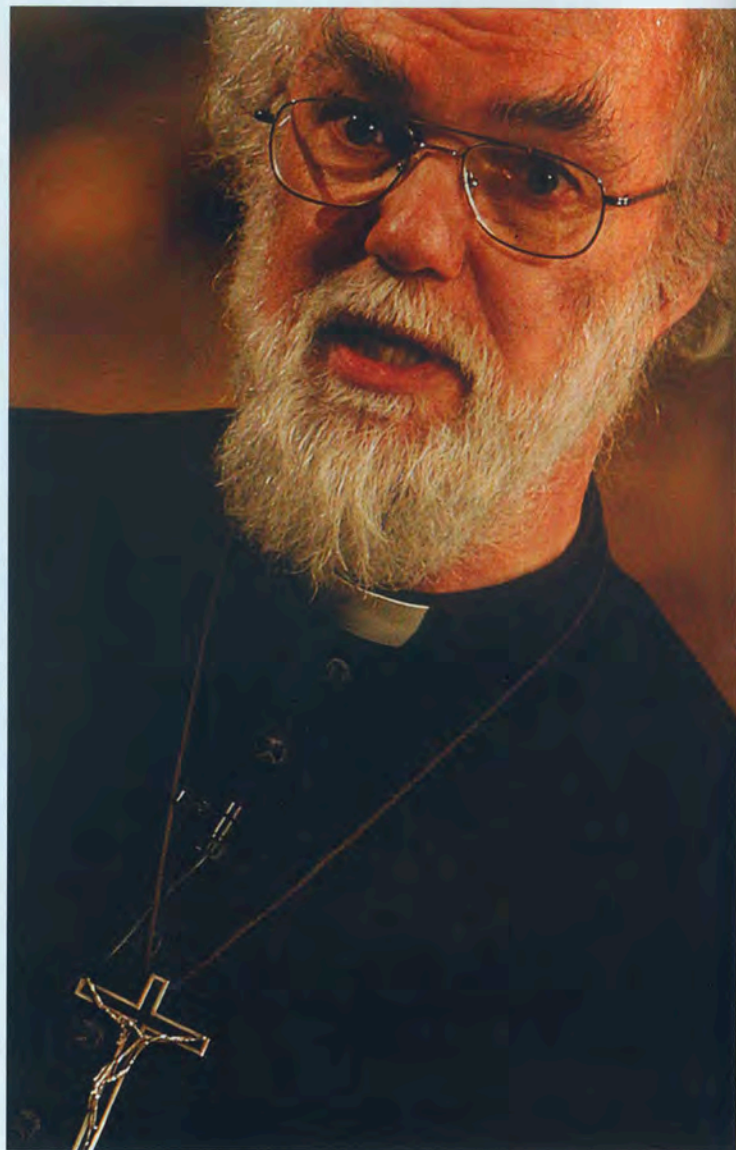
Even the unswervingly faithful may struggle to spend extended spells inside a cosmic bigger picture. Many of us vacillate between shades of faith and our horizons seem to move in and out. But this evening Rowan Williams is making the excitement and promise of the unknown accessible to all.

The problem is that when our eyes are not open to the concept of "something greater" than ourselves, they may also be closed to the concept of things going on under or above the surface of our lives.

"This is when we can't see the mechanisms that allow violence, or scapegoating. We are stuck with our guilt, and when vision offends us, we run from it."

We all have to recognise a failure of self, but when it is put in the context of a greater, unknowable world, Dr Williams says, we get to unlock "a vision of glory, radiance and beauty at the heart of everything."

Hang on a minute though, how do we get from unknowable to beautiful and radiant? Through Jesus, explains the archbishop, and he describes Jesus' mission as



a process of bringing that radiant beauty to light in such a way as to make our endless self-justifications impossible.

Or at least perhaps, the closer we get to that light, during the course of our life's journey, the closer we get to that state of "divine letting go", where we are delivered from our prison of self-justification.

What Dr Williams sees continuing to flourish at the heart of creation is a "vision of endless, unlimited unselfishness. All we have is an endless gift of unconditional love, and an unending labour of giving life."

As he acknowledges, all this would be wonderful if it were true. But is it? How does he come to feel that it is possible? "As the story of Jesus unfolds, we see how tightly we are locked into it. The story is a vision of our own fear, and the love that overcomes it. It seems fear wins – Jesus is condemned and executed. Our refusal to see has finally meant his death on the cross.

"Yet this is the moment of glory. Because what we see is a symbol of love with no conditions, an indestructible love of God. A single moment when the world is transparent to the love that made it."

"If, by standing where I invite you to stand, you see a world larger than you imagined, you have to ask, 'is this a reality, and what do I do with it?'"

Rowan Williams speaking at Great St Mary's Church, Cambridge. Photo: Reuters/Darren Staples

What difference does it make?

So, say you accept all this. What difference does it really make to you and the impact you have on others?

The Archbishop believes faith makes possible a three-step pathway to a much better life. First, it offers "the realism and perspective to see yourself with detachment, not defensively, not vainly self-satisfied - to see yourself as inglorious, yet redeemable."

As a result, he says, "I can see myself as loved, failing, called, entrusted, failing again, but with the possibility of restoration, never as an ultimate waste of space. I can see myself realistically, but with the message, 'Don't panic.'"

The second possibility faith offers is that we get to understand our place and to value what is around us.

"Each of us has a place, a gift of space and time to grow into in the intimacy of holy love. Everything is a gift, nothing is just there, so it's all about giving."

Once we reach the third step, he argues, our understanding shows us the natural way to live, giving and receiving, committed in doing so to making one another more human, and to respecting the gift of the environment and world that we live in. Together these three steps, or aspects of faith, should have vast implications for our roles in society, for our potential to change it for the better.

If we fully embrace them, we extinguish our "emotional infantilism", our selfishness, greed and hatred. Ultimately, Dr Williams argues, faith offers us a way of resisting what is most destructive, and he believes it opens the door to justice and reconciliation in our world. But again the question: are its foundations strong? Is it all true?

Faith and truth

While emanating conviction and self-assurance from the pulpit, Dr Williams equates his position with that of a scientist, poet or playwright and urges us to see it not as a "knock down argument" but as an invitation.

"The author is not saying: I can prove to you that this is how life is, but rather, there is truth to be seen from this perspective. To be shaken by *King Lear*, means I have seen something, not that the play is true, but that it is putting me in touch with truth. So to the question 'is all this true?' my answer is that if, by standing where I invite you to stand, you see a world larger than you imagined, you have to ask, 'is this a reality, and what do I do with it?'"

"Come and see if it is possible to let go of that violent, anxious self, to find that radiant beauty. Decide what you want, come and see, then launch into the deep. Understand that your life lives in the not knowing as well as the knowing."

It's not only the heckler who has stopped shouting during the Archbishop's address. My own endlessly self-focused inner voice has quit for an hour or so, allowing me to listen and meditate on the incredible mystery of life. And everyone around me seems equally euphoric as we troop out of the building and into the night.