

4th February 2021

Unanswered

“The world of adventure and of enterprise, dark with hurrying storms ...
an unanswered question and unanswerable doubt
hidden in the fold of every hill.”

Gertrude Bell, Syria: The Desert and the Sown

The first metaphysical issue I pondered in the innocence of childhood (before I got to the nature of God or the value of my existence) was a question posed in 1959 by Lonnie Donegan in the first “record” I owned: *Does your chewing gum lose its flavour on the bedpost overnight?* As far as I’m aware, there’s no study that’s answered that question, though, given the strange topics people research these days, I wouldn’t be surprised if there isn’t a paper about it in some obscure scientific journal. But for me, both then and now, it’s a question that simply has no answer.

In my ministry, and especially in the hospice, many more important questions were asked, and doubts expressed, often in distressing ways. They could be summed up in one word – “Why?” These questions were often directed at me, as if I was the depository of all wisdom and could offer the definitive answer to every possible question. But I couldn’t. The questions remained unanswered. The doubts remained unanswerable.

Had I failed? Should I have discouraged people from asking their questions? No and no! For though framed as questions, they weren’t questions at all. They were the cries of suffering which folk needed to express. They remained unanswered and unanswerable, but, as outpourings of anguish, they needed to be responded to as with any kind of distress, with the embrace of our love, the tenderness of our empathy, the reassurance of our continued presence. And remarkably, God’s closeness was often more real in *that* approach than it ever was when I stumbled and strained to find an answer to every question.

As we let go of our certainties in Gertrude Bell’s “world of adventure and of enterprise, dark with hurrying storms”, we *can* learn to live with the unanswered and unanswerable, when we choose to leave space for the blessing of God to work.

A prayer for today

*Loving God, hold me in my distress,
and let me believe that will be enough of an answer to my cries. Amen*

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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