

**A series of sermons based on
“Falling Upward: A Spirituality
for the Two Halves of Life”
by Richard Rohr**

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Falling Upward 1 – The first half of life

Family Service & Parish Eucharist 4.9.16 delivered by Richard Bubbers

Luke 15:11-32 – Do you want to stay in the first half of life, like the ‘elder brother’?

This morning we are beginning the first of four in a sermon series on the book by Richard Rohr, interestingly entitled, "Falling Upward."

I think it is an interesting title because, usually, things fall downward. That's how things work – that's the law of gravity – isn't it?

Now I know that some of you have taken the opportunity through the summer to read a copy of this book which was kindly supplied free of charge by an anonymous donor. I would be interested to have your feedback on the book: you may already have an idea of why the falling referred to in this book is **upward**.

The problem

I want to start by giving an illustration which is core to the understanding of what "falling upward" is about. You may wonder what this is – I happened to be given it for my birthday – and initially, to be honest, I wasn't sure what it was. If I take it, and fold up the corners like this, you will see that I have a container. I want to say that it is a very beautiful container, especially as I was given it as a birthday present by a close relative. But the question still remains – what is it for? What am I going to use this container for? What will it be its contents? In other words it's all very well having a beautiful container, but what are the contents to go in it – to give it real meaning and purpose, and not just be something for show.

Richard Rohr explains that there are two major tasks for each human life:

The first task is to build a strong "container" or identity – a platform for ourselves in the world, and the second task is to find the contents the container is meant to hold – what gives our lives ultimate meaning and fulfilment. The first task we take for granted as the very purpose of life: establishing identity, home, relationships, friends, community, security, and building a proper platform for ourselves in the world. In the first half of life, we are naturally and rightly preoccupied with establishing our identity – who we are – climbing, achieving, and performing. This does not mean that we necessarily do it well, but because we are so focused on it, we may not even attempt the second task.

The reality is that we live in a "first half of life" culture, largely concerned about surviving successfully, which encourages us to keep building a bigger and better container. The problem is that this is not a good place to remain in, as we grow older, if we want to find lasting meaning and fulfilment in our life. In other words, to find the contents for the container of our life.

As we grow older, our journey can involve challenges, mistakes, loss of control and suffering, that shakes us out of our comfort zones. Staying in the first half of life will not service us well as we encounter these experiences.

It is important to understand that these two halves of life are not necessarily linked to a person's actual age: some young people, especially those who've learned from early suffering, are already on the second journey/task of life; some older people are still in the first stage of life and concerned with the building and rebuilding of the container of their lives. To give you an example, I met a young boy who

was not yet a teenager who was suffering severely from cancer - I have to tell you that there was something special about that little boy which was beyond his years – I believe he was engaging with the second task of life because of what he was experiencing. By contrast, when I was a practising solicitor, I knew men of my age who were completely stuck in building a bigger and better container and had no awareness of what the second half of life could have in store for them.

It is completely counterintuitive but the wonder, Richard Rohr explains, is that the very things, the heartaches and disappointments which can make the first half of life so hard and difficult, can actually be stepping stones to the spiritual joy and wonder and fulfilment that the second half of life has in store.

Life, if we are honest, is made up of many failings and fallings amid all of our hopeful growing and achieving. These failings and fallings must be there for a purpose, but what is that purpose? We can find it bewildering but does it have to be? Is there a different and bigger way of seeing our lives so that we can find a deeper and lasting meaning and purpose in the second half of life?

In ‘falling upward’ we can come to an understanding of one of the most profound of life's mysteries: our failing and falling can be the foundation for our ongoing spiritual growth and finding inner fulfilment, so that falling **down** can in fact become moving **upward**.

It can take much longer to discover the task of the second half of life, but when we begin to become aware, and to seek it with honesty and integrity, we begin to move from the first to the second half of our own lives. This involves being honest about our motives and clarifying our intentions. Most often, it seems that we as human beings, do not pay attention to the **inner** task until we have had some kind of fall or failure in our **outer** tasks.

The sub-title of the book is ‘a spirituality for the two halves of life’. In subsequent weeks we will be looking in greater detail at the second task of life and how we transition from the first to the second. But today it is important that we look at the first half of life task, and how we can build our container in such a way that we can move on to the second task of life.

The first half of life

As we look at our lives in the context of the first half of life I want to refer to our gospel reading this morning – it was [Luke 15.11–32](#). It is of course the famous parable of the Prodigal Son. There are three main characters in the story: the father, the younger son, and the elder son. We all know the story that unfolds, as the younger son, quite outrageously, asks for his share of the inheritance: he squanders it all in the city and then, completely destitute, he decides to return to his family.

Now at what stage in the first and second half of life do you think each of these characters is, at the point when the younger brother returns home? Let me say it struck me that the story is actually more about the father than the younger son: the father behaves in an incredibly generous and loving way. Then there is the hugely contrasting attitude of the older brother.

To answer my question in terms of the first and second stages or tasks of life, I want to suggest that the father after much suffering and soul-searching has come through to the second stage of life. That is the only way to understand his response to his younger son – [verse 20](#) tells us *"but while he [the younger son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."* The father was actively looking out for his son, and did not wait to greet him but ran out to meet him – an undignified act, not suited to a prestigious Middle Eastern father.

What about the younger son – the prodigal? **Verse 17** tells us that, when he ended up with the shame of only being able to feed someone else's pigs, *"he came to his senses"* It seems to me that the younger son was just beginning on the transition to the 2nd half of life, in the light of the pain and disillusionment he had suffered in the far off city.

Now, what about the older brother? He is the one I want to focus on this morning. **Verse 28** tells us: *"the older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who are squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"* The father replies (**verse 31**): *"my son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."*

It seems clear that the older brother was stuck in first half of life thinking.

The problem with first stage of life thinking is that there is a strong tendency to be ego –centric. The world revolves around my-self. Notice how the older brother describes his younger brother to his father as "this son of yours" not, my brother. The older brother has a strong sense of the rules, and is very aware of his own entitlement. The very thing, which he need not have worried about, because as his father tells him *"Everything I have is yours"*, gets in the way of - is the stumbling block – which stops him being able to receive back his brother. We have no indication that he ever joined the feast. The scene is set for ongoing division and heartache, because of the attitude of the elder son in the first half of life. There are so many situations in many people's lives, which perpetuate unhappiness – for them, as well as for others – because they cannot let go of the hurt which they feel they quite reasonably hold onto - which is because of how they see their lives and their “self” and the paramount need to protect and preserve the container of their lives. The ego-self in first half of life thinking feels this great need to protect and preserve its container, at the expense of all else.

I leave you to ponder the difference between the outlook and experience of the father, and the outlook and experience of the elder brother. What do you want, in your life, as you grow older? Do you want to stay like the older brother, or become like the prodigal father?

Discharging your ‘loyal soldier’

I want to finish with a helpful picture that Richard Rohr gives us of the Loyal Soldier.

There was a situation in post-World War II Japan which demonstrates how people could be helped to move from the identity of the first half of life to the growth of the second half of life. Some Japanese communities had the awareness to understand that many of their returning soldiers were not fit or prepared to re-enter civil or humane society. Their only identity for their formative years had been to be a "loyal soldier" to their country: everything had worked to build this container for their lives, and they needed more in order to once again re-join their communities as useful citizens.

So these Japanese communities created a communal ritual whereby a soldier was publicly thanked and praised effusively for his service to the people. After this was done a great length, an elder would stand and announce with authority something to this effect: *"the war is now over! The community needs you to let go of what has served you and served us well up to now. The community needs you to return as a man, a citizen, and something beyond the soldier."* In other words they were ‘discharging the loyal soldier’.

In our day and society we need to be able to see that the survival technique which has helped us get established in the first half of life - and which has been so useful for that task – cannot get you to the second half of life. The loyal soldier does not even understand it. He has not been there. The black-and-white thinking of early-stage life needs to move into the more subtle thinking of midlife and later life.

The problem is that the loyal soldier will not want to step out into change and growth, and take the risk on what he does not know.

From his experience as a priest and pastor for over 40 years, Rohr describes how it is the challenges and difficulties of life, the setbacks and suffering, which raise the question of ‘discharging your loyal soldier’, usually somewhere between the ages of 35 and 55, if it is to happen at all.

Usually we do not become aware of the need to discharge our loyal soldier until he shows himself to be wanting, incapable, inadequate for the real issues of life – when we find our first stage of life survival technique does not equip us for dealing with the big issues of suffering, love, death and mystery. This is a graphic way of describing the falling and failing that we have been talking about - the way of finding out the task of the second half of life which alone can bring us lasting meaning and fulfilment.

This is how we can let go of our ego self being at the centre of our lives, being our ultimate point of reference and become our true self, with God being our ultimate reference point. This is what the Bible is getting at when it speaks of "*losing yourself to find yourself – losing your life to find life – having life, abundant life, to the full.*" This is how we can begin to grow into the people God always intended us to be. If you need any help to remember the difference, think of the difference between the elder brother and the prodigal father.

Over the coming few weeks we will be looking more at this transition from the first to the second stage of life and what the second stage of life is really about. It may help you to know that it is intended to have transcripts of each talk on our church website and the house groups will be discussing questions arising out of this series. Do please say if you would like to discuss any of these issues further.

In the meanwhile let us remember the wonderful truth that God understands and knows where we are, wherever we are on our journey. He loves us and accepts us as we are, right here and right now, not as we might think we ought to be. We can trust him as we journey on each step of the way.

My prayer is that God will give to each one of us wisdom and grace as we persevere on our journey, so that we may grow in the second half of life task, and become the people God always intended us to be.

Amen

RDB 4.9.16

Falling Upward 2 – Transition

Family Service & Parish Eucharist 11.9.16 delivered by Sue Phillips

Matthew 16: 21-28

This is the second of four sessions looking at Richard Rohr's book *Falling Upward*, which thanks to a kind donor, some of us have been reading over the summer. *Falling Upward!* How can anyone/or anything fall upward, the very notion upends the laws of gravity. What are the requirements for upward falling and what does it entail?

We looked last week at the ideas central to Richard Rohr's two stages of life.

- In the first stage we build a container or construct an identity
- In the second stage we find the contents or address the 'inner task' of finding meaning and fulfilment.

This week we're going to look at the transition between the two stages. Rohr suggests this doesn't happen until we've experienced some kind of failure in the 'outer' task, the living and achieving that make up our public persona.

Last week we looked at the idea of the container made up of the essential building blocks; the rules that create both the security and the boundaries within which we flourish. We looked at the story of the Prodigal son and the prodigious love of the father compared with the self-centred reaction of the older brother, and we asked ourselves which of the three characters we found easiest to identify with. Of course it was important to follow the rule of the first commandment with promise: Honour your father and your mother...

It is important to have a solid foundation as Rohr says -

If you do not do the first half of life well, you have almost no ability to rise up from the stumbling stone. You just stay down and defeated... p71

And of course the behaviour of the younger son shows flagrant disregard of foundational teaching. By claiming his inheritance whilst his father was alive he treated his father as dead and brought dishonour on the family. Then the realities of his chosen lifestyle shocked him into the realisation of all that he had lost and drove him home with a new appreciation of all that his secure home had offered. His failure changed him, and the lad who returned was now ready to receive fully the deep love his father had always had for him. He'd begun the falling upward.

His transition to the second half of life was brought about by his circumstances. What he found in the father was that relationship was more important than rules.

'Every time God forgives us God is saying that God's own rules don't matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with us' p57

This is well illustrated for us in the conversation between Jesus and Peter that we've just read (Matthew 16:21-28). Jesus knows he is going to die, he's been coming to terms with this for himself for much of his ministry, and possibly throughout his early years. But at this point everything is going swimmingly; he's healing sick people, he's feeding multitudes, he's producing a never ending series of wonderful stories to illustrate God's truth, and they're going down a bundle. And to cap it all Peter has just announced that he's caught on to his real identity as the promised Messiah (Matthew 16:16).

Things couldn't be better. But it was at this point that he chose to explain the bigger picture. First he says he will die, then be raised again to life, and after that return showing his true glory, the glory he'd given up at his incarnation, and he'd be surrounded by angels too! What could be more wonderful? The climax was fast approaching, but that's not how it felt to Peter. *"This shall never happen to you"* he shouts. And from being the one to whom Jesus has promised the keys to the Kingdom he receives the ultimate rebuke *"get behind me Satan"*, and he's demoted from key holder to stumbling block.

For Peter, he needed to rethink his confident declaration; for Jesus the reality of his final sacrifice was increasingly coming closer, but for Jesus it was always with the view of the loss of his life leading to the future gain of salvation and Kingdom realities. It's a platform for his teaching – *"Whoever loses his life for me will find it"*. As Rohr puts it, this losing and finding is at the heart of the gospel: The gospel was able to accept that life is tragic, but then graciously added that we can survive and will even grow from this tragedy... it all depends on whether we are willing to see down as up. p58 So in this conversation with Peter the transition phase has begun, the challenge has been set, the stumbling block is in place, the falling has begun.

Now how does this map on to our lives today? Rohr might be a hard read but for me he produces some show stopping one-liners. The idea of 'the tragic sense of life' resonates with me. The prodigal son's wake up was self-inflicted, but for many of us our 'wake up', the moment when our own personal resources prove insufficient for the situation, arises from circumstances outside our control as Rohr describes -

"Sooner or later if you are on any classic 'spiritual schedule' some event, person, death, idea or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with using your present skill set, your acquired knowledge or your strong willpower". p65

But what does it mean to lay down your life. Lay down what? Above all it's a challenge to change from self-sufficiency to dependency on God. For some it may mean laying down longstanding prejudices, the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' of life that we use to take control of situations and protect ourselves from discomfort, for others it may involve laying down attitudes or patterns of thinking like self-pity or self-aggrandisement, or any of the range of defences we use to help navigate our way through the world and exchange them for dependency on God.

We encounter a personal stumbling stone that shakes us out of our comfort zone, but which has the power to transform. I love the quote from Paula D'Arcy *"God comes to you disguised as your life"* p66 There must be says Rohr *"...at least one situation in our lives that we cannot fix, control, explain, change or even understand"* p68

Truth is about reconciling contradictions p68

This is the falling bit, but what is it that decides whether we fall downwards or upwards? It's Martin's job next week to help us explore the second half of life. But for those of us who like to anchor our thinking in Bible passages I'd like to make a quick visit to the woman at the well. Do you remember the story? It's one of those Jesus-breaks-the-rules-of-polite-society moments; we see him in one-to-one conversation with a woman who has a past, but who Jesus sees as someone who is searching for life's deeper meaning. He promises her living water that wells up from within, a deeper meaning of life that satisfies from within and that is sourced by relationship with God and the presence of his Holy Spirit. Who knows to what extent her situation had come about through her own rebellious choices, but there she was at a point where she was looking for a deeper meaning.

In a situation in life which she couldn't fix, here was Jesus with the promise of a falling upward experience that centred on her putting her confidence in his ability to meet her inner needs. She, like us, had the choice.

Falling Upward 3 - The second part of life

Family Service & Parish Eucharist 18.9.16 delivered by Martin Allen

I hope you have been able to get to read the book or hear some of the talks we're working through inspired by "Falling Upwards" by Richard Rohr. Two weeks ago Richard B opened the series by talking about how there are two parts to life - a first part where we are concerned with building our personality, our identity and creating work, family, housing etc. He talked about the rules we need to live by and those we keep to. The metaphor we have used is to think about that is a container and we have used that as a way of thinking about first half of life as "building the container".

Richard focused on the first third of the book, Sue the second which is about making the transition from first to second half of life. She talked about the incongruity there is in falling and falling upwards and about how we move into the second part of life only once we are go through the rock bottom experience, or fall over the stumbling block.

I'm focusing on the third part of the book which is "once you have built your vessel what is it for?" Richard B will then summarise things in the 4th talk and point to ways forward for us as individuals and as a congregation.

A few words of caution. Richard Rohr makes much of the quote from the mystic Julian of Norwich "first is the fall and then is the recovery from the fall and both are the mercy of God" and there is a sense that you get to this second part of life through the suffering you experience. Just a note of caution as Sue mentioned last week. It's not all easy - we take a lot of time effort money and emotional output to build our identity and then in the transition we build on what we have created but also partly destroy it. In the book Richard R talks about how life's problems and issues "the falling" is necessary to move through into the second half of life you can't begin to move up without the fall. So if we have become aware of the first part of life have identified there is a transition then what are the ways to recognise the second part of life?

I think it's helpful to think about the characteristics and behaviours of people we might recognise as being in the second part of life.

Knowing which rules to break

There is a sense that if first half is about learning how to live by the rules the second is about how to learn which ones to break and not be bound by. The first half is about the kingdoms of earth and rules, the second about the kingdoms of Heaven and freedom. The first half of life is about allegiances and defining ourselves by what we are and often what we're not ("I'm a blues fan I'm not a Villa fan", "I'm a Christian and not in favour of abortion so I attack those who are"). The second half of life is about being able to say those things but acknowledge that we can have multiple loyalties - I am a Blues fan and I can like Villa too - I'm a Christian and I can respect those who make hard life choices and terminate a pregnancy. The first part is about rules guiding us the second is about relationships being the most important.

As we question our connections to first half institutions and life allegiances (family, work identity, team identity, faith identity) we may find that people linked with us through those react badly against our moving away from them. If we have been certain of our faith in early life and held certain views, beginning to change those and hold wider views may mean we can no longer be in our first faith group. We see this perhaps in teenagers and young people who are very certain, face challenges and then because they develop a conflict between what they experience and their faith their faith folds. You

may start by saying that Jesus is Lord and believe that women should not preach - finding out life isn't like that may challenge us and mean we move away from our first faith group to a more open and inclusive one.

Greater inclusivity

For RR he describes how he transformed from that fairly narrow type of faith to a wider more inclusive type and became aware of faith in its broadest sense and outside of the Roman Catholic Church. As he did he moved into greater awareness and thinking. The second half of life person sees and recognises faith outside of the Christian mainstream and values that again highlighting the importance of relationship. He contrasts his experiences with getting stuck in first life practices (p109).

Awareness of shadows

He goes on to discuss how we can integrate the painful and shameful shadowy parts of ourselves into a unified whole and stresses the importance of learning to forgive and accept our shadows and to do so with others. 2nd half of life is not about eliminating the negative or fearful parts but accepting them. Because there is less reliance on ego and self, you can respond from a wider palette of ways to respond to situations. We're more concerned about the 8 beatitudes more than 10 commandments. What is the shadow though? It's what you refuse to see about yourself and not want others seeing and there's another caution here about certain roles eg doctor, vicar anyone who defines themselves mostly in their role **Matthew 7:5**. Exposure of shadows allows for the person to be at ease around conflict is that there is little shadow to expose. (P103)

Thus he explains that in the first half of life the well-parented child has mastered some 'limit situations' which has led to a healthy understanding of its own boundaries. Spiritual growth in the second half of life means coming to terms with what Jung would call our 'shadow' side, the side of ourselves we don't want others to see. As we do this we learn that it is not necessary to be right but to be in 'right relationship' (p133). The more we admit our shadow selves, the more humble, forgiving, and loving we become. Those of us who do this can greet our latter years with an inner peace and acceptance; those of us who don't face continued and worsening anxiety and depression.

Focus on others, giving and elders

RR talks about the concept of the "elder" and says "We're creating a lot of elderly people but not elders". He describes an elder as someone who has experienced sadness "deaths" meaning multiple type of loss but as someone who has experienced life. They tend to be serious but have a brightness and lightness and an ability to assure people in the younger part of life that things will be ok. They are more concerned about giving than enforcing their group belief or ideas are superior or concerned about gathering more. They are more concerned to live simply so that others might simply live, more about being about giving life. Not about having what you love but loving what you have. They are people who generate and give "generative people" who are happy with more happy with "both and" than "either or"

Seeds and multipliers

Let's look at our bible passage. Jesus said it's useless to put our seeds on rock, path or sand RR also comments that the person in the 2nd part of life is a "generative person" someone who whatever is happening can generate life, give out, create hope and life. In our passage this is very much like the seed that falls onto fertile soil and grows. For us the seed on dry ground or path may be like those who get stuck building the vessel the first part of life. Generative people tend to be non-dualistic thinkers i.e. they can hold to two different ways of looking at truth under the umbrella of relationships.

Like RB and SP I like the idea of a visual image so I thought with our reading in mind I'd use something you can see touch feel. Can I ask you to pick up the pumpkin seed? It is a type of container as we'll see It's a small container -you might like to take one in the cup and nibble it -toasted pumpkin seeds are a nice snack -but there's not much in the container and you need a lot of them. But if you put it in the ground it's generative and can grow. And as you plant the seed it has to be prepared to lay aside some of its previous appearance and life in order to be transformed into something new and grow.

I like to grow them and have fun with cooking and pumpkins with the end of October and what you can do with them. This year though they are small and not getting on well so I may not have any big plants or new pumpkins. I'm very grateful to Daisy Archie and Susannah for the one they have found for me. There is something for me in this about timing too. I planted them in June so they may never get to go from first life to second life and be fruitful. We can all maybe think of someone who is too late for 2nd half life.

Pity really because the vessel created can have so much in it and so let's taste the aroma coming and see the light shining from a pumpkin. You might like to come up and try a bit of pumpkin fondue. There are some good ways of being generative and showing light and hope.

So what can we do to be second half of life people or a church? I think reading the book, being aware and being prepared to both step off the rush of the first part of life and seeing falling and problems as growth points is good (and yes please do remind me of that when "suffering" comes my way). We can decide what we want to be in our container or come out of it -what we want in a sense to leave behind.

I've recently rediscovered a sermon series by John Stott on Christians in Medicine. Stott was a theologian not a medic but understood medics as his father was prominent London surgeon. In a talk on Christian vocation addressing medical students he talks about the meaning behind vocation, service and work. All of those themes are big issues for Christians and particularly those with a vocational "calling" of which medics and students are some. His understanding of the "calling" is that God calls us not to "do something" or be defined by a role but to "be something" - mostly the best servant and follower of Christ we can be. He challenges medics on what is of supreme importance - it's not of supreme importance to be a good doctor but to be a good Christian and person. And as I heard him talking I heard 2nd half of life thinking flowing out of him. This got me thinking about how I how I introduce myself to others or first meet people. I'm a fan of how we talk and speak being a reflection of who we are or want to be so rather than asking people "what do you do" I'm trying to change to ask what sort of a person are you?

So for further thinking and reflection:-

- Where are you in the whole first life /transition/second part of life journey?
- Are there any parts of you where you need to "stop doing and just be?"
- What sort of person are you - are you a generative person?
- What sort of person do you want to be?
- How will others speak of you when you are here and when you're gone?

Falling Upward 4 – Where are we now?

Family Service & Parish Eucharist

9.10.16 delivered by Richard Bubbers

Matthew 6.25-34 and 7.7-11

1. Recap in this series on Falling Upward: where are we now?

This morning we come to the last in our series of four talks on the book by Richard Rohr, 'Falling Upward – A spirituality for the two halves of life.' We have looked at the two halves or tasks of life: I started with the first half of life task; Sue looked at the transition from the first to the second half of life task and Martin talked about the second half of life task. Transcripts of the talks will be found on our church website, if you wish to look at them again.

This morning, especially as it is a couple of weeks since the previous talk, I want to recap to see where we are now, and then look at a really important difference between the first and second half of life thinking, which can have a big effect on our daily living and affect whether we can transition between the two. I can then finish off with a few suggestions as to how we can take this further forward.

You may remember that I started by giving an illustration which is core to the understanding of what 'falling upward' is about. (Hold up brown container). If I take this flat piece of leather, and fold up the corners like this, you will see that I have a container, but the question remains – what is it for? What am I going to use this container for? What will it be its contents? In other words it's all very well having a beautiful container, but what are the contents to go in it to give it real meaning and purpose and not just be something for show and display. We have looked at Richard Rohr's explanation that there are two major tasks for each human life - the first task is to build a strong 'container' or identity – a platform for ourselves in the world, and the second task is to find the contents the container is meant to hold – what gives our lives ultimate meaning and fulfilment. The problem is that this 'first half of life' is not a good place to remain in as we grow older if we want to find lasting meaning and fulfilment in our life. In other words - to find the contents for the container of our life.

Staying in the first half of life will not serve us well as we encounter the challenges and difficulties and suffering which can come to us as we go through life. We have seen that the thinking of these two halves of life is not necessarily linked to a person's actual age. It is completely counterintuitive. But, the wonder is that our actual failings and fallings can be the foundation for our ongoing spiritual growth and our finding inner fulfilment, so that falling **down** can in fact become moving **upward**. The problem is that the survival techniques which may serve us well in the first task of life are not well suited to dealing with the bigger issues of the second task of life – the great mysteries of life such as love, suffering, death, and God.

This leads us into the reading we had this morning from Matthew's gospel – **Matthew 6**. I want to look at verses **25 to 34**. Our Bible has the wonderful title for this section, 'do not worry'. Now I guess that most if not all of us very much agree with what this passage says about 'not worrying' but the problem, of course, is putting it into practice on a daily basis amid the busyness of life. I imagine that most of us think it is good 'not to worry', about our lives, "*what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear*" (v 25). "*Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?*" says Jesus, in **verse 27**. Then in **verse 34** he says, "*therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*"

Like so much of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount it sounds very good – we don't have any particular problem believing it – but the problem is living it out, putting it into practice. 'Falling upward' invites us to understand that the problem lies in first half of life thinking - the problem lies in what is your central reference point for your life. What is the one thing that your life turns around - that is actually the meaning of the word universe, 'to turn around one thing (uni-verse)'? What is the one thing that your universe turns around – is it your own small personal viewpoint, your own ego-centric viewpoint, or is it something much bigger than that - God's viewpoint, who can involve you in a much bigger and true and loving and hopeful way of seeing all that is around you and before you. You could call first half of life thinking the 'ego mind'.

The problem is if our central reference point is ourselves, our own ego, we are limited to what our ego can see and cope with. Our ego has the need to look after and protect itself at the expense of everything else – it cannot cope with any real change. It has to be in control. This is what Paul is getting in [Ephesians 4.22](#) and [Colossians 3.9](#) when he talks of taking off or putting off the old self and putting on the new self.

Let me use the example of Copernicus. You may remember that Copernicus was the man who discovered that the Earth is not the centre of the universe. We now have to discover that we are not the centre of any universe either. We are not ultimately a meaningful reference point for ourselves. We need to change from and to have freedom from our own ego as our reference point for everything and anything. Although we do have to start with our ego self at the centre to build the container of our lives, we must then move beyond it. The big and full world does not circle around you or me.

2. Do not judge/label - 'both/and', not 'either/or' thinking

Jesus says in [Matthew 7.1](#) something which can be seen as almost the benchmark of our growth into the second half of life - he says "do not judge." It is not part of **our** task in life to do the judging. After we have made the foundational decision to turn to Christ - we have chosen light over darkness and life over death – God says to us that he does not want us to go through our lives judging or as Rohr describes it, with "either/or" thinking. God does not want us to divide every moment between either totally right or totally wrong, either with me or against me.

By contrast God wants us to have 'both/and' thinking. The big difference here is that our old small self, our ego-centric self, does not get in the way and we do not have to see everything in relation to ourselves. To try and make this really clear Rohr describes not judging as not labelling – 'do not **label**'. If we stay with 'either/or' thinking we know things mostly by comparison - we understand everything in relation to something else by how it is different. For some reason once you compare or label things, very quickly you almost always conclude that one is good and the other is less good or even bad. As Rohr says [page 146] "don't take my word for it, just notice your own thoughts and reactions. You will see that you will move almost automatically into a pattern of up or down, in or out, for me or against me, right or wrong, black or white, good or bad". This is the basic reason, as Rohr puts it [p.147] why racism, sexism, homophobia and prejudice of all kinds is so hard to overcome and has lasted so long! If we stay in just 'either/or' thinking [p147], our mind compares, competes, conflicts, and condemns. It is then impossible to do things which Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount like "love your enemies" - because 'loving your enemies' needs 'both/and' thinking. Paul says in [Romans 12.2](#) "do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" and if we do not change our way of thinking all the sermons in the world will not help us to "love our neighbour" and follow the sort of teaching Jesus gives in the Sermon on the Mount. The mind which is always into 'either/or' thinking does not see how to do it. It needs the new 'both/and' thinking to help us see what his teaching means in practice. This is the way for growing in second half of life thinking and becoming more like Jesus. Growing the fruit of his Spirit in our lives - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – those things which we find it difficult to see with first half of life thinking. The software in our minds for first half of life thinking with an egocentric way of understanding does not know how to do this. With my ego as the reference point I am concerned about questions such as do I like it or prefer it, will it give me an advantage, will it make me look good. The ego is always interested in power, in being in control and always likes to feel that its group, whatever that may be, is better than the other group. We can only see change in ourselves and in the world around us if we change this our way of thinking.

‘Either/or’ thinking can be very helpful to get us started in life (in the first half of life) but it does not help us with the situations we encounter as we journey through our lives if we want to find lasting meaning and fulfilment in the second half of life. It is about seeing things as they actually are and not through the filter of our own ego-centric interest. This helps us to understand why Jesus was always welcoming the outsider, the foreigner, the sinner, the wounded one. He was a second half of life man who had the task of trying to teach and be understood by a largely first half of life culture. After his resurrection and Ascension this was compounded by the Greek philosophical thinking of the day throughout the Mediterranean, which was completely ‘either/or’ thinking – everything was defined by its difference.

So to summarise, ‘either/or’ thinking can help you make the foundational choice to serve God but you then need ‘both /and’ thinking to help you work out what that really means and grow in your humanity and in your inner life. ‘Either/or’ thinking cannot help you with the really big issues like love, suffering, death, God, and any notion of infinity. I would encourage you to observe your own thinking and see if you can notice this ‘either/or’ way of thinking in yourself and seek not immediately to go along with it but look for ways to try ‘both/and’ thinking. This has the potential to make us much more aware and open up the possibility of change in how we think which affects so much.

So we have looked at how ‘both/and’ thinking can help move us from first half of life to second half of life thinking. I want briefly now to look at how we can take this forward and discover the benefits of second half of life thinking both individually and together.

3. How we may take this forward

Over the weekend some of us have heard the Archbishop of Canterbury in his visit to the diocese. He has three priorities for our country – reconciliation, prayer and evangelism. He said yesterday that the first priority is becoming a more **prayerful** church (a church which pays more attention to the inner life) – a prayerful church has a future because it will be a **reconciling** influence in our community (not least following the decision on leaving the EU) and also will enable us to show more the love of God to others, which is **evangelism**. He has this week spent Wednesday and Thursday in Rome and spent time with Pope Francis. He said the thing which stayed most in his mind was what Pope Francis said about prayer: "When we pray, we make space in our lives, for mercy and grace." I believe this is another way of describing God’s second half of life task – opening ourselves up to the transforming mercy and grace of God. By grace, we mean the unconditional love of God freely given.

We will be looking for ways of becoming a more prayerful church - do feel able to share thoughts and ideas if you wish to. [This evening the church will be open from five o'clock until the United Service, for silent prayer on the Archbishop's priorities. Anyone is welcome to spend any time they can.] When it comes to praying there is no room for guilt. Different lifestyles and different stages in life afford different opportunities for prayer – some very much less than others. Just do what you can, not what you think you must.

It maybe there is a need for a discussion group specifically around the issues we have been discussing. It may be that you would like to discuss the possibility of confirmation. Whatever it may be, my prayer

is that as a congregation both individually and corporately we will become a more prayerful church and experience increasingly, what God wants to give and do as we engage in the second task of life.

4. Conclusion

I close with the last few verses of our gospel reading ([Matthew 7](#)) “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” God wants you to move into the second half of life. No one can keep you from the second half of your own life except yourself. Nothing can prevent your second journey except your own lack of courage, patience and imagination. Your second journey is all yours to walk or to avoid. Whatever **falling** may happen in your life do not waste too long lamenting what has befallen you but take it as the gift to move you forward into your second half of life. If you desire it, God will give what you truly desire. This desire grows out of your dissatisfaction with the first half of life, and opens up the possibility of transformation and fullness, as you journey on. The key thing, is to **desire** it.

I'm going now to pray a prayer, written by Thomas Merton, which brings this desire to God. I invite you to make it your own, if you would like to.

Let us pray: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I'm going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I'm following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to love as Christ loved does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Amen.

RDB 9.10.16

Questions

Here are some questions which may spark some discussion on the subject touched upon.

Questions on the first sermon on 4.9.16 about 'Falling Upward' - the first half of life

1. What is the picture of the container and its contents about? Do you find it to be a helpful insight, and, if so, why?
2. What you understand by the "first half of life"?
3. Do you see it is good to remain in the first half of life? If not, why not?
4. What do you think might move someone on from the first half of life? Have you experienced a "fall" which has helped move you on from the first half of life, and, if so, what has that meant for you?
5. Is it possible to be a Christian and remain in the first half of life? Can church and your Christian life become a part of your container?
6. Do you have a "loyal soldier" in you? Can you name him? What is he or she trying to protect or obtain?
7. Compare your loyal soldier with the older son in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. What might your loyal soldier keep you from knowing or experiencing?
8. Have you discharged your loyal soldier? If not, would you like to? How might you do that?

RDB
3.9.16

Questions on the second sermon on 'Falling Upward', 'Transition'

1. The younger brother in the story of the prodigal son seemed to have made a choice to move to the second part of life through a process of repentance. To what extent do you think repentance has a part to play in the transition from first to second part of life?
2. The tragic sense of life is a key theme for Rohr (see ch 4). In your observations of life do you agree with the idea of necessary suffering, can you illustrate from your own life or the life of public figures?
3. 'Truth is about reconciling contradictions (p68)'. What sort of contradictions have you found most difficult to reconcile in your own life? Do you remember the first time you were faced with a challenging contradiction? And the most recent?
4. What do you think might move someone on from the first half of life? Have you experienced a "fall" which has helped move you on from the first half of life, and, if so, what has that meant for you? (repeated from last week)
5. Can you imagine how Peter felt when Jesus rebuked him so severely; 'get behind me Satan' and 'you are a stumbling stone'? Why do you think Jesus chose those particular words? To what extent can you identify with those feelings?
6. How do you understand the 'living water springing up from within' that Jesus promised the woman at the well. Is this something available to us now? Does this illustration help you to understand the concept of the second half of life?
7. What part do you think the 'loyal soldier' (an idea introduced last week) plays in the transition from the first to the second part of life?

SVP

6.9.16

Questions on the 4th sermon on 9.10.16 about 'Falling Upward' - where are we now?

1. How have you found looking at the theme of "falling upward", and thinking about life in two halves/with two major tasks?
2. Where are you now, if you feel able to say? First half of life, transition, second half of life – or is it not that clear and simple?
3. Are you happy to stay where you are now? If not, what do you want to do about it?
4. How aware are you of your inner life (your spirituality)? How do you think you can grow in your spiritual life? Is there anything which St Laurence's could do to help you in that?
5. How are you at "not worrying" (Matthew 6.25 – 34)?
6. How are you at "not judging" (Matthew 7.1)? What do you understand by the what Rohr describes as "either-or" thinking and "both-and" thinking? Is there a place for each of these? What do you think makes "either-or" thinking insufficient for addressing the big issues such as love, suffering, death, God, and eternity?
7. Matthew 7.7 : do you believe when it comes to your inner life that if you ask it will be given to you; if you seek, you will find; if you knock, the door will be opened to you?
8. Do you agree that the **desire** to grow is the most important thing for moving forward in your life as a Christian/into second half of life thinking? Does this come from "failings and fallings" in first half of life thinking?
9. Whether or not you heard Archbishop Justin at the weekend, do you believe that it is vital for us to become a more **prayerful** church. If so, why? What do you think we can do about this, individually and together.

RDB
10.10.16