

## THE SIX DEGREES OF KEVIN BACON

**PREACHER : The Very Revd Adrian Newman, Dean**

Sunday, September 13<sup>th</sup> 2009

**Patronal Festival**

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

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In 1994 3 bored students at Albright College in the US were holed up at home in a snowstorm watching the movie 'Footloose', starring Kevin Bacon. When it finished, the very next programme was a screening of the film 'Quicksilver', also starring Kevin Bacon. The students started to speculate on how many movies Kevin Bacon had been in, and how many other actors he had worked with.

As they threw out the names of other actors, they found that it didn't take them long to link them to Kevin Bacon. A worked with B worked with C, who starred with Kevin Bacon in film D. That sort of thing.

The three students developed this time-wasting diversion into a game, The 6 Degrees of Kevin Bacon, which rapidly assumed cultic status across US college campuses in the second half of the 90s and on in to the new millennium.

And lest you are tempted to think this is merely a cheap attention-grabbing gimmicky introduction to an otherwise predictably religious sermon (perish the thought), there is a serious idea that lies behind the Kevin Bacon game, whose implications for the world we live in are extremely contemporary and very relevant.

The title of the game developed by those 3 students was a reference to a classic piece of academic urban development research from the 1920s concerning the way people were increasingly connected at a time of technological advances in travel and communications. That research spawned the so-called Small World theories of Stanley Milgram, and an experiment he conducted in 1967 to see how easily two randomly-selected individuals could find a connection through their accumulated acquaintances. Generally speaking, The Small World Experiment found that it only took about 6 such links to join together 2 strangers from anywhere in the world.

The Small World experiment has been replicated in various guises over the past 40 years and the results are consistently similar. It has come to be known as the Six Degrees of Separation.

What the Six Degrees of Separation points to is a world made small by the extraordinary inter-connectedness of everything.

We know this from our own personal experiences of course, which continue to take us by surprise and cause us to utter 'isn't it a small world!' so often. In the 2 months before we travelled 1200 miles on holiday to a random destination in the Mediterranean, I found myself chatting not once but twice to 2 separate couples who, without any prior knowledge, were visiting here from the tiny church we would be attending during our holiday. How random is that? It's a small world ...

We are all much closer and more inter-connected than we think. Sometimes this doesn't work to our advantage. It is, as we know only too vividly at the moment, extremely easy to spread an infection. Computer viruses and swine flu both spread with alacrity across the web of connections we make with each other.

It is equally easy for economies to become infected. When America sneezes the rest of the world catches a cold. And when the sub-prime mortgage market goes belly-up the bottom falls out of everybody's property portfolio.

To acknowledge this inter-connectedness is to recognise that we cannot think or act in isolation from others. The Fairtrade movement reminds us that our choices about how we spend our money have a deep and lasting impact on the lives of others, often far away. The same is true of carbon emissions - climate change has a disproportionate effect on the poorest people in the world. Being so inter-connected (which is one thing) makes us equally inter-dependent (which is another).

When St Paul drew upon the Human Body as an analogy for the Church he was wrestling with similar ideas of inter-connectedness, mutual responsibility, and committed dependency. These ideas are common to all communities, but are of special relevance to the Christian Community, the Church, because Christ and his earliest disciples bequeathed us a vision for the church community as a model of a New Society.

What is true of our world, and what is true of the church, is also true of cathedrals. Some of you will have heard me describe the Cathedral as a Russian Doll - that is to say, there are many different communities and constituencies that regard themselves as part of the Cathedral, and if you peel away one expression of the cathedral's life you find another, equally valid one, underneath. And another, and another ...

The Russian Doll analogy is helpful in suggesting the complexity of a Cathedral, but it tends to imply that each layer of the doll is complete and separate in itself - which is far from the case. In fact, the myriad connections and dependencies across the different constituencies and interests are precisely what makes running a cathedral on the one hand so interesting and on the other so difficult! No action or decision is ever discrete - it always has a knock-on effect somewhere else in the organisation.

In my very first sermon in the cathedral, back in January 2005, I asked you to keep me honest. What is the point of this man? Keep challenging me – don't let me be seduced by either the title or the role that is involved in being Dean of Rochester. But I might also have asked the question: What is the point of this Cathedral? And the answer would be, to hold up a mirror to people's lives so that they might see new possibilities for themselves and for the world, possibilities that emerge from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The connectedness of so many things in Cathedral life can be experienced as an inhibitor to these new possibilities – it's easy, after all, for people to fight the corner of their particular bit of the cathedral organisation. But looked at differently, this extraordinary inter-connectedness and mutual responsibility can become part of what we are pointing people to – a new way of relating, based on a delight in diversity, and a respect for our differences.

As the early church saw themselves as one body with many parts, they increasingly began to use the language of 'family' to describe the nature of their relationships. Disciples of Christ were brothers and sisters to one another. The ties of Christ's blood were considered as strong as the ties of family blood.

When Jesus on the cross had said to his mother Mary, 'woman, behold your son', and to John, 'behold your mother', this was not simply a practical solution to Mary's impending bereavement, it was the beginning of a new set of relationships. John took Mary into his home from that day onwards, and things would never be quite the same again.

In the life of this cathedral, do we dare to regard each other in this way? It's all a bit scary, and not very British, but the challenge is there for us – in our connectedness and mutual dependency, are we prepared to really work at our relationships, and afford one another the dignity, generosity and respect in how we deal with one another, that tends towards the quality of a familial relationship?

As we strive to span and straddle the six degrees of separation within our cathedral and our society we do well to remember the mutual responsibility we bear to one another, amidst the complex web of relationships woven across the landscape of our everyday lives. After all, whether you know Kevin Bacon or not, it's a small world.