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Time for Church? Evangelicals, Scripture and Conversational Hermeneutics.[1]

In this paper John Thomson invites evangelicals to recognise more explicitly the role of the church in the interpretation of Scripture. He argues that the narrative shape of the Scriptures and their relationship to God's story invites ecclesial hermeneutics. Using Gen. 1 as a case study, he suggests that the way ancient redactors went about their task reflects this sort of approach. Using the metaphor of conversation he challenges Anglican evangelicals to practice ecclesial hermeneutics within their Communion aware that such conversations will involve not only sharing but also learning new insights and, on occasion revising existing convictions in the process.

Introduction

At NEAC3 the late Archbishop Runcie challenged evangelicals to give greater attention to the doctrine of the church.[2] In 2003 at NEAC4 in Blackpool I detected a significant commitment to engaging with what it means to be church in the Anglican stream. In particular this manifested itself in debates about the truthfulness of Christian convictions concerning homosexuality. The fact that the majority of the Anglican Communion held to a traditionalist interpretation of the biblical texts was seen as trumping revisionist hermeneutics. In consequence a commitment to ecclesial hermeneutics seemed to be emerging amongst evangelicals. This implied that Scriptural interpretation could not be left simply to the individual pious believer or indeed, for that matter, to the church in the west. Instead a more catholic vision of the church as the interpreting community was required. Of course such a position might be tested if a majority of the Communion accepted the revisionist case, as some would argue has happened over the ordination of women to the priesthood. Hence it remains unclear whether in fact most evangelicals regard the hermeneutical role of the Anglican Communion as essential to the interpretative task or simply convenient, a hermeneutical strategy or a convenient tactic. As a result I remain concerned that the hermeneutical role

1 My thanks to Revd Dr Andrew Goddard and to Revd Canon Martyn Percy for reading this paper and offering constructive comments. I take full responsibility for its present form.

2 For a systematic approach which takes up something of this challenge see Tim Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch; An Evangelical Doctrine of the Church*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 1992.

of the church still remains under-appreciated by evangelicals as they listen for and act upon God's word. In *Fanning the Flame*, the collection of position papers for NEAC4, Timothy Ward's exploration of the performative character of God's words as 'speech-acts' and Tim Dakin's attention to holy communities in mission are both suggestive but underdeveloped in this regard.[3]

This tendency to under-appreciate the hermeneutical role of the church no doubt reflects the legacy of the sixteenth century Reformation's attempt to escape the totalising agenda of Rome and to protect the freedom of the believer rooted in the doctrine of justification by faith. However to under-rate the formative practices of the church through time and across the globe in the way Scripture is interpreted ignores the sociality of Christian discipleship and disconnects the story of Scripture from its historical embodiments. It furthermore neglects the importance of the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the church and the way this informs how we interpret Scripture.[4] This consequently disconnects rhetorical apologetics and proclamation from communally embodied apologetics and ecclesial holy living. It thereby renders Scripture prey to abstract interpretations, which purport to be objective but actually reflect particular sociological addresses. The challenge, therefore, is to interpret Scripture within the conversation of being the church rather than as abstract individualised interpreters or indeed a church within the church. Paul Gardner begins to hint at this when he suggests, in the same NEAC collection, that to escape individualism and limit human fallibility, there needs to be a community of interpreters engaged with the Bible.[5] Such ecclesial hermeneutics inevitably involves contested views of what it means to be church, a particular challenge to Anglican evangelicals, webbed as we are within a diverse Communion.

I want to argue that lack of attention to the intrinsic relationship between Scripture and church not only hides vital elements of the way we attend to God but fails to do justice to the very character of Scripture itself. It therefore corrodes the commitment evangelicals have always had to the authority of Scripture and to faithful obedience as we listen to God in and through Scripture. In order to argue this I will first indicate what led me to the conviction that greater attention needed to be paid by evangelicals to the place of the church in Christian faith and theology and particularly in the engagement with Scripture. Secondly I will suggest how Scripture indicates the way church is intrinsic to its revelatory role. Thirdly, I will illustrate how this might offer a faithful evangelical attention to the Scriptures using the early chapters of Genesis as a case study. Fourthly, I will use conversation as a focal metaphor both to explore how ecclesial hermeneutics can sustain a creative yet faithful pluralism and also why this approach might appear challenging to some approaches to Scripture within the evangelical tradition. My hope is that the

3 Timothy Ward, 'The Bible, Its Truth and How it Works' and Tim Dakin, 'Encouraging Mission-Mindedness: The Quest for an Ethos of Mission Spirituality in the Church' in Paul Gardner, Chris Wright & Chris Green, eds, *Fanning the Flame: Bible, Cross and Mission. Meeting the Challenge in a Changing World*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan 2003, pp 17-34, 282-99.

4 For a fascinating discussion of imparted righteousness and sanctification within evangelical thinking as well as in other traditions see A. M Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1988, pp 24, 30, 33 & 49.

5 Paul Gardner, 'Isn't it All a Matter of Interpretation? Scripture, Truth and Our World' in Gardner, *Fanning the Flame*, p. 50.

suggestions in this paper may indicate a more irenic and constructive conversation about the way Scripture in the church enables us to listen for the word of the Trinitarian God in the present discussion on same sex relationships.

A Personal Journey

As a teenager and young adult I was attracted by many of the strengths evident in evangelical convictions. Among these were the stress upon clarity, simplicity, immediacy, intimacy and security in one's relationship with God. In addition, the commitment, energy and concern to engage contemporaries with a gospel for today were also profoundly attractive. Among evangelical Anglican Christians I was inducted into a faith, which stressed personal accountability, the relevance of Scripture to ordinary life, the importance of personal holiness, and the challenge to think through all of life in the light of Christ. I was also introduced to its social action tradition as well its commitment to personal piety.

However, the very strengths of any constituency are often the occasions of significant weaknesses and blind spots, as Dave Tomlinson's 'post-evangelical' challenge articulated.[6] Indeed, as one formed in central Africa, I was aware that the communal dimension of Christian identity was somewhat weak in the English circles I was moving in. For example, a relational concept, such as 'personal', in personal faith, was easily elided into the more atomistic concept of 'individual' with corrosive and fragmentary consequences for understanding Christian community. Similarly, recognition of the influence of context, history, culture and economic interests seemed absent in the way Scripture was often read and interpreted. A period spent in South Africa, both as an ordinand and later as a theological college lecturer exposed me to more catholic and liberationist Christians within and beyond the Anglican tradition.[7] Here I met Christians who were severely critical of what they regarded as evangelicalism's individualistic and pietistic faith, its lack of in-depth social critique, its fractiousness and its superficial reading of Scripture. By 'superficial' was meant a lack of attention to the context and identity of the interpreter(s) and their socio-historical location. In particular evangelicals seemed to under appreciate the ecclesial implications of being a baptised person and hence being an ecclesial person webbed into the wider church. The impression conveyed to them by many evangelicals was that Scripture could be interpreted in the abstract, innocent of the hermeneutical challenges involved.[8] This, they felt, was particularly evident in the accommodationist responses to apartheid by many evangelicals, particularly in the white community.[9] Whilst the sweeping character of such criticisms could be contested, they suggested to me that evangelical enthusiasm

6 Dave Tomlinson, *The Post Evangelical,* Triangle, London 1996.

7 For a short analysis of theological thinking in Southern Africa see John B. Thomson, 'Modern Christian Thought; South Africa' in Alister McGrath, *Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought,* Blackwell, Oxford 1993.

8 For a substantial discussion of hermeneutics and its implications for biblical study by an evangelical scholar see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Descriptions with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein,* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1980, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics. The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading,* Harper Collins, London 1992 and *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self,* T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1995.

9 Of course such generalisations were open to challenge as the work of evangelicals such as Michael Cassidy and African Enterprise and Bishops Philip Lefevre and Peter Lee among others displayed in their engagement with the challenges of Christian discipleship in South Africa.

for personal commitment and discipleship was in danger of neglecting the sociality of Christian discipleship with its implications, among others, for how Scripture is attended to. In particular for Anglican evangelicals, webbed as we are into a plural ecclesial community, this has particular force. To be part of *this* church means more than simply attending a local evangelical congregation.[10] Particularly in areas of fragile churchgoing, such as South Yorkshire, it involves working actively with Anglicans and others of different persuasions, a mission which inevitably raised issues of interpretation.

Making the Church Visible in our Reading of Scripture

In response to these challenges I wish to suggest that a more explicitly ecclesial reading of Scripture is not only essential but is also called for by the character and narrative structure of the Scriptures themselves. As Edith Humphrey argued in *Fanning the Flame*, – using Tom Wright's dramatic architecture of Scripture configured around the great themes of Creation, Fall, Israel, Messiah, Church and Parousia, – Scripture offers us a grand narrative within which to locate our own stories.[11] In addition 'our reading and understanding…has been shaped by the ongoing Christian tradition, and deliberately so, since the Scriptures themselves intimate that this is fitting'.[12] Reading Scripture, therefore, is always a conversation within the church.

Karl Barth and Hans Frei have shown us that the Scriptures self-confessedly invite a faithful community to participate in the divine story as agents rather than merely passengers. The biblical story is the story of God's relationship with creation. It is therefore the most embracing and fundamental of all stories engulfing all other narratives within itself. Hence it embraces and goes beyond the Scriptures in the sense that it is inclusive of all that God is about, some of which is yet to happen. What the Scriptures do is delineate the character and shape of the story by narrating the identity and mission of its principal agent, God, in his relationship with creation. The biblical story is therefore finished in the sense that its character and shape are correlative to this God and God's definitive self revelation in Jesus Christ. However it is not exhaustive since it allows space for further enrichment and, arguably, corruption since the invitation to be agents in the story offers a degree of relative freedom and contribution to creation, both human and non-human.

Thus both these great theologians explore the way we are enfolded into the biblical story rather than trying to fit the biblical story into some prior explanation of human existence.[13] In consciously participating in the biblical story, the faithful

10 For a fuller discussion on the place of church in ministry and discipleship see John B. Thomson, *Church on Edge: Practising Ministry Today,* Darton, Longman & Todd, London 2004.

11 Edith Humphrey, 'Kairos and Chronos: Meditations on Revelation, God's Word and God's World' in Gardner, *Fanning the Flame*, pp 105-08.

12 Edith Humphrey, 'Kairos and Chronos', p 110.

13 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol II/2, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1957, p. 704 and Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics,* Yale University Press, New Haven & London 1974, p 130-35. See Frei's essay 'Karl Barth: Theologian in George Hunsinger & William C. Placher eds, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, pp 168-73. For what distinguishes Barth from Frei, see David E. Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture,* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1997.

community contributes significantly to the subplots of that story, whose focal plot is the redemption of the cosmos by Jesus Christ, God-with-us enfleshed and now glorified. As John Webster has shown, Barth's transcendental preoccupations did not imply Christomonism and thereby reduce human actions to insignificance as mere emanations of divine activity. Rather the language of covenant, partnership and invocation imply that God and humankind are mutually determining, though different, moral agents.[14]

Scripture, Christ and Christ's Body.

The Scriptures are self-confessedly incomplete or underdetermined, not in terms of their focal salvific Christological plot, but in terms of how that plot engages and is embodied by the community, which it brings to birth. By 'incomplete', or 'underdetermined' therefore, we mean that the story they speak of awaits the Parousia for its consummation. It therefore offers space for present and future contributions. As Sue Patterson argues 'underdeterminedness (is) at the heart of an incarnational Christology' and this implies that a pluralist church reflecting a rainbow of stories is indicative of the universality of the Gospel.[15] This does not threaten the sufficiency of Christ as the full and final revelation of God. It does though, suggest, that what Christ *means* extends beyond the historical Jesus to embrace the cosmic Christ with whom the church is intrinsically connected as body to head.[16] What Christ exhaustively means will only be completely known at the Parousia. Hence the story of Christ is ongoing even though Christ is the finished, that is, definitive Word of God.[17]

This consequence of the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ implies that what Christ is becoming, though configured around the historical identity of Jesus, is open to enrichment, as the body of Christ is led by the Spirit into all truth.[18] As Gerard Loughlin argues, 'the church is the community that tells Christ's story by being itself the continuing story of Christ; embodying the story of Christ in the circumstances of its day'.[19] The embrace of the Gentiles and the changed understanding of the Torah in Paul are indicative of this. The Scriptures whilst representing the Christologically definitive way that salvation pathway is to be walked, do not delineate in advance all that will emerge on that journey. Christ, as the rule for the church's reading of Scripture, is only realised in the practice of faithful reading.[20] However, the timeful and narrative character of these Scriptures, suggests that walking in this way will dispose the church to see new truths immanent in all that the Christ represents and is becoming. Some of these new truths may appear to conflict with earlier understandings, as in the case of female leadership in church and society or the possibility of limited forms of usury within

14 John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action In Barth's Thought,* T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1998 pp 168-78.

15 Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999, p151.

16 See Col. 1:15-20.

17 See Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology,* Blackwell, Oxford 2000 p 173. See also Edward Farley on ecclesiality in Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1982 pp 193-218.

18 John. 16:12.

19 Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible Church and Narrative Theology*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996, pp 82-4.

20 Loughlin, p 119.

nominally Christian societies. However the fact that analogous changes were present from the earliest days of Christianity, means that ethical change is consistent with the possibilities implied by both the narrative dynamics of these Scriptures and by Scriptural precedent.

Thus the Pentecost gift of the Spirit to the church is the ground for the church's capacity to discern where Christ's truth is active in contemporary contexts. Such discernment will also be contextual, since the way Christ is known to different communities will have its own particularity reflective of the incarnation itself. The relationship between discipleship and the ancestors or circumcision rites of South African Xhosa culture will require a particular Christological discernment whose outcome may be quite alien to north European Christians. Equally the relationship between discipleship and sexual identity may be discerned in north European contexts in a way quite different to that in traditional Xhosa culture. What enables such diverse discernments to remain in conversation is that both seek to be accountable to what the church has learned of Christ so far on its Spirit infused journey. This Christ is definitively but not exhaustively narrated in the Scriptures and, for Anglicans, is attended to in common worship. Common worship is how the whole church, lay and ordained, listens for God's word today as it is being formed into a faithful people. It is common not in the sense that everyone one is present at any one moment, but that the way discernment happens includes all the baptised and is accountable, under God, to the baptised who are themselves held together by the sign of that baptism. Common worship, therefore, does not necessarily require unanimity, given the character of discernment in the End Times as like looking in a dim mirror from the ancient world.[21] Rather it requires mutual yet accountable trust that the church, in different contexts, has different challenges to face and therefore distinctive discerning to do. Argument and disagreement will be inevitable given the finite and fallible character of the church. Nevertheless this Christian 'phronesis' or practical wisdom is more reflective of the implications of the Incarnation than the temptations of abstract and timeless theorising about the ways of God with life. It is about openness and listening rather than a closed system of ideas.[22]

All this suggests that – prior to the Parousia – discernment of provisional prophetic narrations of Christ's contemporary identity is possible. Hence, in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the majority of Christians, including many evangelicals, argued that Christ was on the side of the anti-apartheid struggle rather on the side of biblically justified racism.[23] Similarly Wilberforce and Shaftsbury saw Christ as involved in the liberation of slaves and, more ambiguously, many Christians, including evangelicals, have come to accept that a degree of usury is compatible with Christian discipleship. All these discernments represent challenges to past interpretations of certain biblical texts or traditions. To their evangelical protagonists the legitimacy of these discernments is that they are consistent with the Christological template of the historical Jesus as mediated to us through the New Testament. This Jesus is

21 1 Cor. 13:12.

22 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn, Sheed and Ward, London 1989, pp 20-2.

23 On the declaration of apartheid as a heresy see John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1991, pp 212-25. See also *The Road to Damascus: Karios and Conversion,* Scotaville, Johannesburg 1984 pp 17-27.

not locked into the past, or into ancient texts, but as risen and ascended is present to creation by the Spirit in such a way that the story of God is ongoing and, arguably, developing. The church is both charged with discerning how the risen, ascended Christ is active by the Spirit in creation affairs and with allowing its life to embody the contemporary Christ. The Christian community, both as discerner and participant in the ongoing story, is, therefore, vital to the way the story is being told and will finally be told at the End we call the Parousia. This is because the Christian community, as the *body of Christ*, represents and contributes to an embodied apologetic for the story of God. As we noted above, Webster's exposition of Barth indicates that the way the church lives before God as a partner in the divine story contributes to the richness of that narrative without determining its fundamental shape and destiny. Similarly Stanley Hauerwas is correct to argue that 'sharing in an interpretative community produces a common life making Scripture intelligible. Scripture is not intelligible on its own'.[24] In short, the communal life of the church, as a hermeneutical community discerning Christ's contemporary action in its life and in the world, witnesses to and, in some way, substantiates the meaning of the story of Scripture since the ecclesial and Scriptural story coined here.

God and God's Story – Conversation with Creation

The dynamic character of this participation in the divine story is reflected in the naming of the early Christian community as the community of the Way. As well as implying a destiny such a description implies that pilgrimage, journey and movement are characteristic of discipleship rather than the distillation and articulation of a timeless ideology/theology. As such it also suggests that the past does not contain the totality of the future, however indicative it may be. Such a dynamic view of Christian discipleship, furthermore, is consonant with the dynamic character of creation and history. Scientific and historical research increasingly describe their findings within dynamic categories rather than using the static ones of the ancient world.[25] It is as if the narrative character of the Scriptures finds echoes in the narrative character of creation and history.[26]

Furthermore the space opened up in creation for a serious and genuine participation in the divine story by that creation (particularly humankind), together with the dynamic identity of God implied by the Trinity, suggests that God is not outside the story as some timeless stability as deists' have posited. Rather God, through the Spirit, participates perichoretically in creation and thereby is involved in the social and thus linguistic world, without being reduced to an object in or of

24 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Interpreting the Bible as a Political Act' *Religion and Intellectual Life*, 6, Spring-Summer 1989, pp 137. For a creative engagement with this theme see Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*, Abingdon Press: Nashville TN, 1993. For a discussion of Hauerwas' reflections on narrative and ecclesial politics see John B. Thomson *The Ecclesiology of Stanley Hauerwas: A Christian Theology of Liberation*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2003.

25 On the historical sciences see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp 9-29. On the post-empirical sciences see R.J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Blackwell, Oxford 1983, pp 20-33.

26 Daniel W. Hardy, *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1996, pp 91-130.

this world.[27] Nevertheless God's story, which engulfs all other stories, is not a totalitarian narrative but one which emerges in and through this relationship. Indeed, precisely because of God's own character, the story is underdetermined; that is it has real space for active and morally accountable participation by God's creatures. There is a conversation going on as we are invited into God's story. God's sovereignty, therefore, is not expressed in the crushing of creation, but in the offering to creation of genuine moral space for response and contribution. God's power is correlative to God's character. The Scriptures, by representing the ways of God with creation in narrative terms, invite this way of walking and conversing with Christ. It is this journey, as Hauerwas suggests, which enables the church to contribute to the story of Christ as his body 'the organised form of Jesus' story'.[28]

Such a conversational understanding of the relationship of God with creation is further delineated as we reflect upon the implications of the incarnation of the Logos as Jesus of Nazareth. Here we note the character of God's self-expression within the limitations and horizons of time and space. That Jesus engaged with the Torah, Wisdom traditions and Prophets as a Jew within the horizon and norms of that era should indicate for us that it is precisely from within the horizons of our own contexts that we do the same with the Scriptural traditions.[29] This is the 'scandal of particularity' whose contention is that, in order for all to be redeemed, God acted in the detail so that no detail or depth could escape His grasp. It also warns us against seeking a timeless blueprint for social order in the Bible, since the Incarnation offers not an abstract timeless exposition of God, but rather a narrative exposition of God. Christ is Saviour not because he and his work transcend time in idealist terms, but because they inhabit and redeem time from within, thereby respecting the created order and its timeful character. In consequence all of time is not obliterated but seen as the environment within which this salvation can be known.

To expect that we can read the Scriptures exactly as Jesus did is to presume, falsely, that both he and we can escape from the character of existence in time. We can certainly seek to follow the direction of Jesus' interpretation of Scripture, which he promised would continue and develop under the guidance of the Spirit given to but not contained in the church.[30] However since Jesus wrote no book, the mediated character of his story itself indicates that the interpretation of Scripture for today will be through the presence of the risen, ascended Christ in his church by his Spirit, rather than simply by assuming that we can jump across time and space to engage immediately with the Jesus of history. The image of the empty tomb is vital here, since it speaks of a Christ who is not contained in any temporal space any longer, whether this be geographic or textual.

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27 Brad J. Kallenberg, 'Unstuck from Yale: Theological Method After Lindbeck', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 50 (1997), pp 201, 209-13. Kallenberg is careful to ensure that God's participation in the social linguistic world does not detract from God's transcendence by offering a perichoretic understanding of this participation.

28 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, 4th edn, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1986 p 41.

29 For a discussion of this, in particular what is called the 'Third Quest' for the historical Jesus see N.T. Wright *Jesus and the Victory of God,* SPCK, London 1996, pp 83-124.

30 John 16: 12-5.

Understanding Scripture: The Contrast between Christianity and Islam

Such a view of Scripture is quite unlike the Islamic understanding of their Scriptures. The latter represent a definitive and exhaustive account of the ways of Allah with the world, which is now a closed account. As such Islam is more of an ideology than a narrative, a single theological language in contrast to the multilingual church emerging from Pentecost. Hence Islam is about submission in ethical obedience rather than any affecting of the life and story of God. From what I have argued above, the form and character of the Scriptures suggest that, in Christ by the Spirit, the Christian community is embraced as an active participant within the life of the Trinity. The narrative of the Ascension involves the welcoming by the Father of all that Christ's story represents and will represent.

Listening for the word of God, therefore is listening for the voice of the Spirit-mediated ubiquitous Christ, whose body St Paul calls the church, that community which historically and today participates in his risen life. Worship, therefore, becomes the environment wherein the Word communicates God's prophetic word to us. Hence the word of the Lord for a given community at a particular time is discerned by that community as it gathers to attend to the Word of God present by the Spirit in worship, Scripture and Sacrament. However, any particular ecclesial gathering is also webbed into a wider community symbolised for Anglicans in the person of the Bishop. It must therefore attend to the way that community is also listening and responding. It is partly the role of liturgy to enable this listening to be common rather than at the mercy of particular interest groups within a congregation or diocese. It is sobering, as mentioned above, to recall that Afrikaner Christians in the Dutch Reformed Church believed that a unilateral reading of Scripture could locate racial differences in the created order and thereby theologically underwrite apartheid, despite the dissent of the wider Christian community, including their own Reformed tradition.

Church, Wisdom and Scripture: Interpreting Genesis Chapter One

Listening for the word of God today therefore involves a careful attention to how – according to the Scriptures – our ancestors listened for God's word in their time and context. For example, the creation account of Gen. 1 offers an illustration of the community of Judah exiled in Babylon hearing the best 'scientific'wisdom of their captors and refracting this through a profound grasp of their traditions about the God they worshipped at this time.[31] Furthermore by placing this account of creation at the beginning of their 'history', the ancient redactors integrated what later would be called the books of nature and of revelation. In consequence, it could be said, God's word meets us as church in a critical reflection upon the best available human wisdom concerning the cosmos refracted through the experience of the community's worship of God to date. In short, this involves the church discerning what of contemporary human wisdom is consonant with the worship

31 For discussions of the way worship refracts contemporary wisdoms such as the sciences see Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise,* Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1984, p 42 and the essays in part II of Daniel W. Hardy, *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith,* T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1996.

of God in Christ today and what is not. This 'way' of interpreting life and God does not seek to escape the conclusions of human wisdom. Rather it repositions and interrogates them from the perspective of the people of God. It thereby avoids the deception of ideology, which suggests that ideas can be held in a timeless and context-less way. By masking the fact that we are in time and located in a multi contextual environment, ideological readings deceptively ignore the more challenging hermeneutical task. They can even imply that how we read these chapters is identical to the way they would have been construed by their initial authors.[32] Not only does this subvert the implications of the incarnation and history, but it hides the place of the church in the reading of Scripture.

It is this sort of contextual ecclesial hermeneutics, as opposed to ideological hermeneutics, which has enabled many evangelicals to take on board the insights of contemporary science. It is clearly anachronistic to suggest that the reflections and stories of Gen. 1-11 give temporally advanced examples of modern science or history. However looking at the way the authors of Gen 1 attended to God helps us analogously to engage with new insights from wherever they emerge. Furthermore what we have suggested regarding Gen. 1 can also be used to help us engage with other Scriptures. The aetiological accounts of Gen. 2-10, the Torah, the Prophets, the Wisdom traditions, the Psalms, Jesus Himself and the New Testament are all representative of a community at different stages on its way before God. In addition the composition of some of these Scriptures indicates that Israel was open to receiving wisdom from beyond the contours of the community of faith.[33]

Such Scriptures are not resources to be scoured for metaphysical ideology nor are they static fixtures to lock the church into the past. They dispose us to listen for God today in ways analogous to – and alert to – what has gone before. They are our tradition and, as Gadamer has reminded us, tradition is the prejudice that enables us to understand.[34] What this does, is to render the Christian community a community open to the new in a way that is more difficult in Islam. However it also means that the church, as a hermeneutical community, is called to discern when that new is present. This is a decision which, in Anglican conviction, involves common worship – the attentive wisdom seeking of the whole community – rather than simply the clergy or the theological elite.[35]

This approach is liberating but also disturbing, since it may involve recognising a contemporary listening to God as in superficial conflict with earlier attentions. Nevertheless, it is not about abstract rights and wrongs, but about contextual response whose ultimate meaning is not given until the Parousia. As shown in the cases of slavery, the place of women in Church and society, usury, male

32 For the disappearance of the author in the transmission of texts see Paul Ricoeur *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 2nd edn, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982, pp 91-4.

33 James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993 pp 150 & 205.

34 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn., Sheed & Ward, London 1993 pp 267-77.

35 On the liberation of the laity and the role of Scripture in the reformed Church of England as envisaged by Richard Hooker, the 16th century English Reformer see Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church: Theological Resources in Historical Perspective* T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1989 pp 60-67.

circumcision and food laws, the Church at different times in its history is able to discern that what was a word for an earlier generation is a word for today in a different way. It is arguable that within this frame of reference we may discover a way forward in the debate over same sex relationships.[36] This is because descriptions of reality including moral evaluation, do not remain static, since those doing the describing and the context of the describing are both in time. Hence there is a constant re-describing of what is going on, a re-narrating of the story so far. Tradition may help to stabilise the fluidity of the interpretation by reminding the hermeneutical community that it is what it is because of its past. Tradition, however, does not excuse that community from its contemporary task to listen for God in the present. Indeed, as indicated in our discussion of Gen 1, this tradition disposes Christians to listen to the best wisdom of its day and carefully to locate this wisdom within its ongoing interpretation of the story of God indicated by that tradition. For example, the way sex and sexuality have been scientifically re-narrated in western societies over the past two centuries requires careful discernment by the church rather than by sectional groups or individuals to ensure that if there is a word of the Lord here, it is faithfully heard.

Ecclesial Hermeneutics: Sharing in a Conversation

Conversation, to my mind, offers a flexible metaphor to describe this process. George Lindbeck's cultural linguistic theory is a reminder of the communal, linguistic and hence plural character of religious identity in this life. It cautions against monological hermeneutics, individualistic or sectarian. However, his use of language as his focal metaphor can appear to lock such communities into self-sustaining water-tight enclaves.[37] Conversation intrinsically implies openness to the other. It is also indicative of friendship and disposed towards peaceableness, the goal of the kingdom of God. In addition, such ecclesial engagement with Scripture as part of the wider church may paradoxically offer a more stable and open hermeneutical approach than more individualistic or positivist approaches actually deliver.[38] This is because it engages a more varied constituency and thereby guards against the unreflective self-deceptions and limitations immanent in individualistic and positivistic approaches.[39]

Some may have a concern that this hermeneutical conversation will necessarily include Christians beyond the evangelical constituency. Indeed it implies that evangelicals may actually learn from others and change their understandings of Scripture in consequence of such conversations. For any who believe that

36 This is why the approach offered in Timothy Bradshaw, ed., *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* Hodder & Stoughton, London 1997 must continue for ecclesial rather than merely pragmatic reasons.

37 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, Religion in a Post Liberal Age* Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1984. For a critique of Lindbeck see Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford 2000 pp 35-8.

38 Positivism is the belief that knowledge about something can be objective and unaffected by the condition of the knowing subject. Although popular in 19th century, it is no longer sustainable even in the natural sciences and mathematics.

39 See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Church as a Community of Interpretation: Political Theology between Discourse Ethics and Hermeneutical Reconstruction' in Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, Crossroad, New York 1992, pp 66-76.

evangelicals possess the definitive Christian language, this suggestion is particularly disturbing, since it questions whether it is possible to have such a pure language free from any sense of linguistic pollution. Furthermore this conversational approach raises questions about who presumes to be the custodian of such a 'pure' language, where such custodians obtain their legitimacy and how they can achieve such linguistic coherence. All this brings us back to the church, since it is only in a sufficiently robust and catholic community that hermeneutical perspectives can be rigorously tested and the deceptions of positivism and sectional interest avoided.

As I have argued, context, history and the timeful character of human existence, witnessed to in the Incarnation, undermine any notion that human agents can know truth absolutely or in an un-interpreted way. In particular, for Anglican evangelicals, located as we are within a pluralist Church, there is at minimum a structural acknowledgment of the multi-lingual character of that Church and by implication, of the Christian pilgrimage. If this is so, then not only should evangelicals explore their own mother tongue to test its continuing capacities, but it may also be necessary for them to become bi or tri lingual in order to understand how and why other traditions within the Anglican Communion interpret Scripture in the way that they do. Such language skills and conversations are not about subverting convictions and identity. They are about recognising a degree of provisionality within the tradition and the implications of recognising fellow travellers within the same ecclesial community. To engage in such conversations is to accept a degree of openness, intrinsic to the character of all conversations. We may begin with convictions, but in entering a conversation we accept that the outcome is not guaranteed in advance.

Post evangelicals, such as Dave Tomlinson, doubt whether evangelical speech can still do its hermeneutical and theological work. Hence his move from the House Church Movement into something of a more anglo-catholic hue. In contrast, like Graham Cray, I feel that this can be avoided if the evangelical language speaks more about assurance than certainty, in narrative terms rather than propositional terms and recognises the complexity of the hermeneutical challenges of Scripture. The latter I have suggested is a task involving the community of faith rather than simply the individual or sectional group. Given such an approach it may be that some evangelicals will not feel that in order to grow they have to go out of the evangelical conversation.[40]

Conclusion

My intention in this essay has been to encourage evangelicals to recognise the ecclesial character of hermeneutics. I have suggested that the church is intrinsically involved in the way evangelicals interpret Scripture, even if the impression often given is that this is unrecognised. It is therefore important for evangelicals, to take more account of the church as a hermeneutical community. The church itself is a community of communities spanning time and the globe and for Anglican evangelicals, the Anglican Church or Communion will form our primary ecclesial

40 Graham Cray, 'Obeying the Truth in a Network Society: The Problem of Truth in a Changed World' in Field, *Fanning the Flame*, pp 73-78.

hermeneutical community, albeit one which is porous to the wider church. As a hermeneutical community the church will be embodied in contextual ways leading to differing understandings of what the word of the Lord means for particular communities in distinctive contexts. Thus instead of expecting always to discern a singular and univocal 'word of the Lord' independent of time and place, contextual meditation on the Scriptures would offer a more plural set of responses. For evangelicals, such responses would need to cohere demonstrably with the Christologically focussed story of Scripture. This approach, I believe, is consistent with the shape and character of Scripture itself as an open narrative of God's ways with the world, whose consummation is still outstanding, but whose core plot pivots around the saving work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God-with-us.

Such ecclesial hermeneutics is not about abdicating of responsibility to a clerical or educated elite.[41] On the contrary if the rich story of God is to be articulated this attention and conversation includes all God's people as participants, in particular the weak and marginal. It challenges church leaders by indicating the priority of listening with the church for the word of the Lord rather than informing the church about the word of the Lord. This will act as a check on leadership cults and the potential for fragmentation consequent upon individualistic or sectarian interpretations of Scripture. It will be attentive to those outside a particular tradition and will happen in a variety of dimensions of a church's polity. Hence reading the reflections of other Christians and engaging in conversation with them will be intrinsic to ecclesial hermeneutics. Furthermore this approach will dispose evangelicals to be critically open to new insights which raise questions about past interpretations of Scripture as sound learning as well as tradition are present in the way Scripture is engaged with.[42] Of course, a narrative construal of Scripture demands humility, patience and generosity where discernment is complex and contested within the church (such as over same sex relationships). It is Scripture in the church, which will enable us to hear God's word to us today, rather than Scripture independent of the church. Indeed, as an Anglican evangelical, I am bound to recognise that in the Anglican Church are many fellow travellers of differing traditions and convictions (including gays and lesbians). This is the implication of baptism for ecclesial identity, since baptism involves God's grace grafting me into his community of ecclesial people.[43] To hear God's word in the interplay of Scripture and Church is to let their stories and voices contribute to the conversation.

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41 For a discussion of the relationship between ordinary and elitist theology see John B. Thomson, 'Phronesis and Sophia: Church and Academy Practising Theology in Concert?' possibly forthcoming in *The British Journal of Theological Education* (November 2004).

42 This reflects Anglican evangelicals acceptance of the triumvirate of Scripture, tradition and reason (sound learning) in the discernment of God's word for today, albeit whilst giving Scripture primacy.

43 For the implications of baptismal identity and ecclesial personhood see Williams, 2000, pp 209-11.