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The Role of the Arts in the Church of Tomorrow¹

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“Are you sure,” she asked, “that it is God whom you serve?”

The Cardinal looked up, met her eyes and smiled very gently.

“That,” he said, “that, Madame, is a risk which the artists and the priests of the world have to run.”²

Karen Blixen is not often regarded as a religious writer, yet her stories – odd, whimsical, stories within stories – ought to be compulsory reading for all ordinands and clergy. In them nothing can be taken for granted, least of all God. One of the best of these stories is entitled “The Blank Page”.³ I will not spoil it for you, except to read the last sentence: “It is in front of the blank page that old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself, sink into deepest thought.” The blank page – the blank sheet – the lack of a mark the sign of guilt, or innocence.

All poetry is words entering into that blank silence. Like the Torah in the Rabbinic tradition, true poetry is not, finally, produced, but rather itself makes worlds. It is not speculative but essential, creative of a universe of wonder, seeking mysteries rather than providing answers. Poetry, and its cousin the story, can easily be dismissed in a hard-edged, practical world – “it’s only an old story, an old wives’ tale” – a dismissal made as long ago as the First Letter of Timothy.⁴ Yet poetry and story, even when few people actually read poems or even decent novels, are hard to eliminate or eradicate, as the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch once observed. They have a habit of coming back and taking us to edges that are challenging or risky, demanding that we use our imaginations in the making of moral choices or the entertaining of deliciously impossible possibilities (or possible impossibilities).

Mary Warnock reminds us that David Hume defined ideas as images, and thus regarded the imagination as playing a central role in our thinking.⁵ Without imagination our perception is dull and muddled. The Romantic poets went even

¹ Delivered as the second annual Scottish Episcopal Institute Lecture on Thursday 26 October 2017 in the Memorial Chapel of the University of Glasgow.

² Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), “The Cardinal’s First Tale,” in *Last Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 26.

³ Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), “The Bank Page,” *Last Tales*, pp. 99–105.

⁴ I Timothy 4:7.

⁵ Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (London: Faber, 1976), p. 15.

further. Coleridge, following closely the thought of Schelling, described the imagination as the “prime agent of all human perception” and nothing less than a divine faculty in humanity, echoing “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” It is a dangerous faculty both divine in imitation and demonic in aspiration – beware the poet:

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.⁶

The risk of the artist and the priest: but before we consider the Church of today and tomorrow, we must enter a little further the mystery and the scandal of the Bard. In *The Devotions* of John Donne, a scandalous poet who moves without compunction or pause between bedroom and sanctuary, “religion is treated as a repertory of roles to be enacted in a world demanding constant interpretation”⁷:

The *stile* of thy works, the *phrase* of thine Actions, is *Metaphorical*. The *institution* of thy whole *worship* in the *old Law*, was a continuall *Allegory*; types & *figures* overspread all; and *figures* flowed into *figures*, and powered themselves out into further figures...⁸

As in the writings of Archbishop Laud, contemporary with Donne, events constitute a language, and words become events. Poet and Churchman also take us directly back to Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry* (1595). Following the teaching of Erasmus, Sidney’s essay commends the imaginative and fictive element in all education. In ancient Greece, philosophers “durst not a long time appear to the world but under the masks of poets”, while in the Psalms of David,

What else is the awaking of his musical instruments, the often and free changing of persons, his notable *prosopopeias*, when he maketh you, as

⁶ S. T. Coleridge, “Kubla Khan”, in *Poetical Works*. Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 298.

⁷ Dominic Bake-Smith, “Exegesis: Literary and Divine”, in David Jasper, Ed. *Images of Belief in Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 175.

⁸ John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. Ed. A. Raspa (Montreal: McGill – Queens University Press, 1975), p. 100.

it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts' joyfulness, and hills leaping, but a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith.⁹

Theology colours the language of Sidney's *Apology*, the poet's "erected wit" allowing entry into the golden world of poetry even in the context of the "infected will" of fallen humanity. A modern poet, the Welsh clergyman R. S. Thomas, catches this poetic salving beautifully in his poem "The Prayer", beginning with that all too familiar hesitancy in prayer:

He kneeled down
 dismissing his orisons
 as inappropriate; one by one
 they came to his lips and were swallowed
 but without bile.
 He fell back
 on an old prayer: Teach me to know
 what to pray for. He
 listened; after the weather of
 his asking, no still, small
 voice, only the parade
 of ghosts, casualties
 of his past intercessions. He
 held out his hands, cupped
 as though to receive blood, leaking
 from life's side. They
 remained dry, as his mouth
 did. But the prayer formed:
 Deliver me from the long drought
 of the mind. Let leaves
 from the deciduous Cross
 fall on us, washing

⁹ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), in Edmund D. Jones, Ed. *English Critical Essays, 16th, 17th, 18th Centuries* (Oxford World's Classics, 1965), pp. 5–6.

us clean, turning our autumn
to gold by the affluence of their fountain.¹⁰

Even as the poem challenges us, notice the simplicity of Thomas' language. It is not that we do not understand the words, but the poem leads us towards the mystery and grace of prayer. As a priest, Thomas was immersed in the language and prayers of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, just as Sidney, we can assume, was immersed in the liturgy of the Elizabethan *Prayer Book* of 1559. Their sense of poetic mystery in language stands in stark, indeed shocking, contrast to the banalities of words in the most recent liturgical experiments of the Church of England's *Common Worship*, driven by the extraordinary (and highly patronizing) notion that our language of worship must be somehow "accessible" or easily understood. Listen to some words from the Introduction to the recent Church of England *Alternative Baptism Texts*, misguided, it seems to me, on a number of different levels.

What we describe as the 'language' of faith includes not only words and actions but also a culture of understanding what the Church, the Bible, the Sacraments and prayer are for. In many parishes this language or culture of faith is not shared by many of those with a deep spiritual yearning and who ask for baptism because they want the very best for their children or for themselves.¹¹

This is pretty despairing stuff of a Church on the back foot or worse. It is also theologically illiterate. One does not need to go back to Archbishop Cranmer but only to the nineteenth century and the arguments surrounding the Gorham judgment of Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter, or the debates between Gregory Dix and Geoffrey Lampe in the twentieth century on Christian Initiation, to realize how thin our theology of baptism has become in those vague terms "deep spiritual yearning" and "the very best for their children".

And it is all to do with our sense of language and the life of words. The sixteenth century *Book of Common Prayer* emerged at a time of intense theological energy, and literary flowering (and the two are closely linked) that embraced the

¹⁰ R. S. Thomas, *Laboratories of the Spirit*. (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 10.

¹¹ Published by Church House Publishing, London. 1 September 2015.

writings of Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney and others that looked back to the fourteenth century *Canzoniere* of Petrarch in a poetic tradition that emphasizes the textual rather than the contextual aspects of language, forging a creative distinction between, on the one hand, lyric fictions as agents of diachronic change and, on the other, myth and ritual as agents of synchronic stability. There is material here for a whole course of lectures, and you are expecting me to talk about the church of tomorrow, but I refer briefly to the liturgical poetics of the English Prayer Book simply to suggest that their longevity is at least in part due to their deep rootedness in the traditions of late medieval and Renaissance poetics, not to be maundered over as examples of beautiful English lost to our present prosaic age, but far more as highly precise vehicles of theological mysteries towards which, and refusing all simplifications, they lead us. After all, in the sixteenth century, getting your theology wrong in trying to simplify could cost you your head. Here is a nice example – the words said at the giving of Communion. The 1549 and 1559 Prayer Books begin with the same words:

The bodie of our lord Jesu Christ which was geven for thee, preserve thy body and soule into everlasting life....

But 1559 goes on, each word crucial:

And take and eate this, in remembraunce that Christ died for thee, and feede on him in thine heart by faith with thankesgevyng.¹²

I need not labour the point. The physical act of *eating* the bread is also an act of *feeding* in the heart, the while remembering, the action done in faith and with thanksgiving. Complex, precise, each word a diamond – turning, as the poet says, our autumn to gold.

The translators of the King James Bible, like Archbishop Cranmer, were not consciously producing a literary classic. Their concern was with salvation, and the words of Scripture acted, using another metaphor than that of the diamond, but rather as “a fountain of most pure water springing up into everlasting life.”¹³ They knew, as did Cranmer, that words bite. Words, properly and precisely used, can eat

¹² There is an excellent recent edition of the Prayer Books of 1549, 1559 and 1662, edited by Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). But the only parallel text edition remains that of F. E. Brightman, 2 vols. (London: Rivingtons, 1915).

¹³ The King James Bible, “The Translators to the Reader.”

in our souls through both our hearts and minds, and this is something very different from the instrumentalism that lies at the bottom of much of the language of today's church in its theology and its worship. If poetry can often seem old fashioned or irrelevant it remains, at its best, consistently radical, challenging our theology from within, for the real scandal is itself theological. But without the precision of the true wordsmith theology itself begins to decay – and my real fear is that too often our institutional obsessions blur our concern for theology, and that, ultimately, will be fatal for the church.

Let me give you an example of what I mean in a fairly familiar poem of Thomas Hardy. Philip Larkin once said that Yeats was the greatest English-language poet of the early twentieth century, but Hardy was his favourite. I know what he means. I have lived with Hardy's poems now for nearly sixty years, and still they provoke and are capable of bringing on tears. A great experimenter in verse, Hardy had what we might call perfect pitch in language and rhythm. He listened to words and then words begin to speak precisely on different levels, in understatement, in absence, inhabiting the gaps in the dishonesty of our conclusions, prizing open our comfort zones. Who but Hardy could begin a poem with the line, "Her laugh was not in the middle of her face quite," and scan it perfectly through three verses? (That hanging word 'quite' would be exactly understood by another of the world's great poets, the author of St. Mark's Gospel.) Here is Hardy's poem, "Afternoon Service at Mellstock (*circa 1850*)"

On afternoons of drowsy calm
 We stood in the paneled pew,
 Singing one-voiced a Tate-and-Brady psalm
 To the tune of 'Cambridge New.'

We watched the elms, we watched the rooks,
 The clouds upon the breeze,
 Between the whiles of glancing at our books,
 And swaying like the trees.

So mindless were those outpourings! –
 Though I am not aware
 That I have gained by subtle thought on things
 Since we stood psalming there.¹⁴

¹⁴ Thomas Hardy, *The Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 403.

There is not a word out of place. The key lies in the looking not the thinking. “We *watched* the elms, we *watched* the rooks...” In contrast there is the *glancing* at the books. In the singing we swayed like the trees – one with all creation in worship in contrast to the abstract ‘subtle thought’ of the older, thinking, disbelieving man. And what does the poet mean by the word ‘mindless’ – yes, the mindless boredom of the child in church, but as well, and at the same time, perhaps, that suspension of intrusive thought, that being within the worship that the contemplative tradition works so hard to achieve and the child ‘knows’.

One of the problems with poetry is that it takes time to read and hear, and we are always in such a hurry, impatient for results, anxious to be seen to succeed. Poetry can also be shocking in ways that uproot the ordered boundaries of our lives, careless of rank and station. I have mentioned John Donne, but, for me, George Herbert is an even more unsettling poet, the gentle and saintly Herbert of Bemerton, though he was said to have had a short temper (a fault that history has ironed out). In Herbert, by careful language, sex gets into church, boards are struck in impatience and sin lurks everywhere, though there is also joy and comfort. For our purposes today, I kept coming back to the poem “Sinne (1)”, which looks back in form to the Elizabethan love poetry of writers like Sidney – and behind him to Petrarch. (I should say that I still prefer to read Herbert in the selected edition of R. S. Thomas – whose poetry we have already encountered – another ill-tempered Anglican priest who had much in common with his great Welsh-born forebear.)

Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round!
 Parents first season us: then schoolmasters
 Deliver us to laws; they send us bound
 To rules of reason, holy messengers,

Pulpits and sundayes, sorrow dogging sinne,
 Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,
 Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in,
 Bibles laid open, millions of surprises,

Blessing beforehand, tyes of gratefulnesse,
 The sound of glorie ringing in our ears:
 Without, our shame; within, our consciences;
 Angels and grace, eternall hopes and fears.

Yet all these fences and their whole array
 One cunning bosom-sinne blows quite away.¹⁵

Ah – how those two last lines cut each of us to the quick! Fenced in by the institution and its formalities – beneath all our triumphalisms, education and structures lurks that which quite blows them all away. And is it not here that theology begins, its demand that which theology serves? What Herbert calls “cunning bosom-sinnes”, the 1559 Prayer Book calls the “devices and desires of our own hearts.” A less Christian Irish poet, to whom I have already referred, also knew a thing or two about the human heart and those “masterful images” (not least in theology) of which we are so proud. In “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”, Yeats wrote:

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of the street,
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone
 I must lie down where all the ladders start,
 In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.¹⁶

Like most institutions, certainly like universities, the church would be perfectly fine if it were not dragging around with it, like Robert de Niro’s character in the film *The Mission*, all the junk accumulated, sometimes perhaps with good cause, over the centuries. We are very attached to the junk, but poetry pulls no punches – it is always calling us back to the beginning, not giving the answers, but exposing the questions and the risk – that it might all be just a sham, the junk just junk. This is the risk that all artists and priests have to run, and, to be honest, admit.

I want more briefly to think about the other arts apart from literature – the visual and finally music. Long ago in an essay on modern art Paul Tillich distinguished religion in the larger sense, “being ultimately concerned about one’s own being, about one’s self and one’s world, about its meaning and its estrangement and its finitude,” from religion in the narrower sense, “having a set of symbols... divine beings... ritual actions, and doctrinal formulations about their relationship to

¹⁵ George Herbert, *The English Poems*. Ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 158.

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 392.

us.”¹⁷ I am not, of course, dismissive of the latter sense of religion, but it is with the former that we must begin before it is expressed and located in the historical continuum of the latter. And the former, larger sense of religion often begins, and sometimes ends, in negation and despair – a hard gift to faith. I have long regarded Vincent van Gogh as one of the greatest of religious artists, his painting, like the music of Mozart, a gift from God. But listen to the last words that he wrote in a letter to his brother in July 1890, the month of his death, found on his body after his suicide.

Well, my own work, I am risking my life for it and my reason has half-foundered owing to it – that’s all right – but you are not among the dealers in men as far as I know, and you can choose your side, I think, acting with true humanity, but what’s the use?¹⁸

In the art of Van Gogh, Rembrandt, or Grünewald we are confronted with a deep tragedy – seen in the face of Bathsheba or the eyes of Van Gogh – that is unanswerable, redeemable only in the absurd faith of the Cross. Without this often harsh elemental vision and the power of the image, the church and its theology face banality and a slow death from delusions of relevance. But it is not hard to see why Christian theology has always had iconoclastic elements, beginning with the second commandment in the Hebrew Bible, sustained by a fear of the image of the divine even while it is admitted that if poetry is finally about silence, then art leads us into the depths of absence, the unseen beheld through what we see – the fascination of the blank sheet.

It was in 2002 that I reviewed a collection of essays edited by Jeremy Begbie entitled *Sounding the Depths: Theology Through the Arts*. The essays had some pretty weighty theological contributors, among them Rowan Williams and David Ford, as well as artists of distinction. They grew out of conversations and collaborations between artists and theologians to explore, as they put it, “the considerable variety of ways in which the arts can enrich the theological enterprise.” I did not like the book, disagreeing with its fundamental, rather domestic, premise, and my review provoked a robust response from Jeremy in the ACE journal *Art and Christianity*. I was asked to respond to Jeremy’s response, and nothing daunted, I did – and we had a good set to in print and a subsequent little conference, though we have remained

¹⁷ Paul Tillich, “Art and Ultimate Reality,” in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Ed., *Art, Creativity and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), pp. 219–35.

¹⁸ Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters*. Ed. Mark Roskill (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 340.

friends. The key sentences in my response to Jeremy's response to my initial review are these:

If Jeremy assumes that there is a direct and ultimately harmonious relationship between theology and the arts, so that Christian theology might continue graciously to seek wisdom from the inspired hand of the artists, I do not believe this to be the case. Their relationship is much edgier and more problematic.

... a true Christian theology is something far more radical and revolutionary in its terms than the theological games we have been given to play in churches, seminaries, or departments of theology. The truly great artists – Dante, Milton, Rembrandt, Blake – were not simply orientated to the scandal of the Christian Gospel. They were, I believe, radical Christians who provided spaces for theology to do its task, though without giving any of the answers.¹⁹

This term “radical Christian” is, I suggest, the dark heart of this lecture. The church rejects the term in the sense that I would define in a passage of prose that has haunted me for years, for part of me thinks it is profoundly true, even as I remain within the church. Those of you who know me well will not be surprised to hear that it is by my old friend, the death-of-God theologian Tom Altizer. (I was once described as the only theologian in the United Kingdom who took him seriously!) It concerns the poet and artist William Blake.

Blake belongs to a large company of radical or spiritual Christians, Christians who believe that the Church and Christendom have sealed Jesus in his tomb and resurrected the very evil and darkness that Jesus conquered by their exaltation of a solitary and transcendent God, a heteronomous and compulsive law, and a salvation history that is irrevocably past. Despite its great relevance to our situation, the faith of the radical Christian continues to remain largely unknown, and this is so because that faith has never been able to speak in the established categories of Western thought and theology because it has so seldom been given a visionary expression (or, at least, the theologian has not

¹⁹ David Jasper, “A Response to Jeremy Begbie,” *Art and Christianity*, no. 35 (July 2003), 8–9.

been able to understand the radical vision, or even perhaps identify its presence).²⁰

Such words may seem dark and shocking in the present context and in this chapel, but I take them with deadly seriousness. The role of the arts in the church of today and tomorrow lies rooted in the vision of the radical Christian. In their way all the poets and artists I have mentioned so far come into this category – from the saintly Herbert to the tragic Van Gogh. They are all risking their lives for their art, and the price can be high. Jesus, of course, is their great forerunner.

But before I turn finally to the church, I want to sound a somewhat different note that might sound rather oddly after what I have just been saying. But as I turn to the art of music, the greatest harmonies contain and resolve necessary dissonance. During the past two years I have been working with a research student whose thesis is concerned with St. Augustine of Hippo's little-read early work *De Musica*, begun before his baptism in Milan in 387 CE and finished later in Africa in about 391 CE. (I should indicate here my gratitude to this young Chinese scholar Junxiao Bai who has opened up for me the field of Augustine and music.) *De Musica* is a long and complex work, sadly neglected as it tells us much about the roots of Augustine's later mature Christian theology, but my point here is essentially simple. It stands with the earlier work of Aristides Quintilianus as the most substantial treatise on ancient music written from the standpoint of Pythagorean harmonics based upon two fundamental consonances, the ratio of two to three (the perfect fifth) and three to four (the perfect fourth). The first five books of *De Musica*, on rhythm and meter are, says Augustine, necessary but finally trivial, a prelude to the serious matter of Book Six on the hierarchy of numbers that constitute the soul, the universe and the angels. In short, the mathematical perfection of music is indicative of the divine structure of all things. We do not know how the music of the early church sounded, but for Augustine the art of music was nothing short of a participation in God's created order, and it has perhaps remained so in our church. In the words of Robert Taliaferro, the translator of *De Musica*, "Augustine is fascinated by these [musical moments in time] which are and are not, and which

²⁰ Thomas J. J. Altizer, "William Blake and the Role of Myth in the Radical Christian Vision," in Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 182.

are really understood only in so far as they are held distinct and together in the memory, just as the creation is only a whole and its parts as seen in Christ.”²¹

I have deliberately introduced this theme of harmony late in what is in other respects a dissonant paper on the place of the arts in the church. Close attention to the precision and exactitude of language, line and note can be revelatory of truths in art (I use the word ‘truth’ deliberately) that the church cannot afford to ignore or patronize as mere embellishments of its theology or spirituality. They form the very substance of things, as the poet and thinker S. T. Coleridge once put it, “living powers” capable of highly creative and equally highly deconstructive moments. But before I move on from Augustine I should acknowledge that my old opponent in the arts Jeremy Begbie, a fine musician, has written a splendid book entitled *Theology, Music and Time* (2000) that ought to be on every ordinand’s reading list, even the most tone deaf of them. Music, Begbie argues, is the clue to living peaceably with God’s ‘time’ within the created order, its rhythm, metre, improvisations windows upon eternity, capable of freeing our limping theology from destructive habits of thought. As a theologian I was particularly struck by the chapter on improvisation, its spontaneity a freedom born only of years of discipline and practice. A good model for prayer, perhaps – and a splendid reason why we should all listen to good jazz. It was said of Albert Einstein:

Improvisation on the piano is a necessity of his life. Every journey that takes him away from the instrument for some time excites a homesickness for his piano, and when he returns he longingly caresses the keys to ease himself of the burden of the tone experiences that have mounted up in him, giving them utterance in improvisation.²²

I wish I could say that when I say evening prayer, as an easing of the burden of the tone experiences of each day.

I hope that I have set a few cats loose among the pigeons, and I am not going to apologize for any of them since I regard cats as, on the whole, more attractive than, well, many human beings. So one more before I try and draw the threads together. My colleague Professor Heather Walton wrote a lovely review of my book

²¹ Robert Catesby Taliaferro, Introduction to *On Music, The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 4. St. Augustine (Washington DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), p. 164.

²² Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 179, quoting from Alexander Moszkowski, *Conversations with Einstein* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), p. 235.

The Sacred Desert (2004) in which she described me as rather like a boy scout wandering with gritted teeth and stiff upper lip amongst the desert rocks. She had a point, I admit. For much the same reason I remain a secret reader of the unfashionable Scottish writer John Buchan. And in this spirit Buchan's description of St. Paul has stuck with me for many decades – a bit *gung ho* but it has a point.

The big courage is the cold-blooded kind that never lets go even when you're feeling empty inside, and your blood is thick, and there is no fun or profit to be had, and the trouble is not over in an hour but lasts for months and years. It is called fortitude. I reckon fortitude is the biggest thing a person can have – just to go on enduring when there is no guts or heart left in you... the head person at that job was the Apostle Paul.²³

Why do I bring this in here? I am sure that many of you here will share with me the experience of being ordained into a church (in my case the Church of England) many decades ago, that was very different from the institution we work within today. As numbers of people and clergy decline – and the changes are far more complex than that – the structures we spend so much time and money over become more fragile and often, frankly, irrelevant. We keep our spirits up by the thought that, well, if it all falls to bits the church will survive in a different form – but I do sometimes wonder about that as a crypto-radical (yet also, I admit, deeply conservative) Christian. We can, occasionally, drag ourselves into the twenty-first century, as in the recent marriage decision in General Synod, and congratulate ourselves on being relevant – but I wonder what it amounts to.

Yet I still do believe that when only two or three are gathered together God will grant their requests – as long as though those requests are serious and well meant. Another poem for the ordinand's (and all clergy) reading list is Philip Larkin's "Church Going". The old non-believer, like Hardy before him, shuffles awkwardly into the musty church "wondering what to look for", and finding in it

A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie around.²⁴

²³ From John Buchan, *Mr. Standfast* (1919), quoted as frontispiece to C. H. Dodd, *The Meaning of Paul for Today* (London: Collins, 1958).

²⁴ Philip Larkin, *The Less Deceived* (Hull: The Marvell Press, 1966), p. 29.

And that was written in 1955. How much more so now? So – here’s my punch-line. A church without serious theology and a deep sense of prayer should shut up shop today. Go off, sing songs and do good works somewhere else, but don’t pretend to be what you are not. And prayer begins with struggle in the presence of God, though it can be, sometimes, a little more than that. When the novelist Vladimir Nabokov was once asked if he was surprised by anything in life he replied, “The marvel of consciousness – that sudden window swinging open to a sunlit landscape amid the dark night of non-being.”²⁵ That marvel of consciousness is, it seems to me, nothing less than prayer. But prayer – a listening as well as a speaking – can never be less than intelligent and alert with every faculty of our being. And frankly, I fear the demise of careful, thoughtful theology in both church and university. What I have been suggesting is that Christian theology, rooted in the apostolic tradition and history, *begins* in dark questionings and the searing revelations of poetry and art. These are not options for our future, for whatever that might be, they lie at its very heart. Poetry was once called by Charles Wesley to keep its place as the handmaid of religion, a suggestion which many years ago I dismissed remarking that poetry is not a domestic servant in the house of religion. Rather it is the very engine of religious thinking and formulation.

I have no idea what the church of tomorrow may actually be like as an institution. But it will survive, I suggest, only if it shuns the material and economic categories of the world, ceases from its anxieties to be seen to be useful or efficient, and lives with all care and precision the life of prayer and service in hidden ways. At the end of Christendom the church may learn at length the blessings of obscurity. Learn from that great writer and humanist of the nineteenth century, George Eliot – no churchwoman she. Her greatest novel, *Middlemarch*, famously ends.

For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.²⁶

But to conclude I want to return to the author with whom I began, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), reminding you of the Cardinal’s response to the question as to whether it is God whom he served: “That, Madame, is a risk which the artists and

²⁵ Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), pp. 158–60.

²⁶ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* [1871-2] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 896.

priests of this world have to run.” And without the risk there is nothing. Perhaps Dinesen’s most familiar story (familiar to more, perhaps, from the film version) is *Babette’s Feast*. Many of you will know it in broad outline. Two elderly unmarried sisters live beside a remote fjord in Norway in the nineteenth century – each deprived of youthful love and marriage by their strict puritanical father who had been the “founder of a pious ecclesiastical party or sect, which was known and looked up to in all the country of Norway.” Two lovers – one a dashing young army officer, the other an opera singer from Paris, had come and gone from their lives. Many years later, after the death of their father, the sisters, who have loyally kept his church going, take in Babette, a cook and an exile from a Paris torn by civil war, and she becomes their servant, cooking their plain and simple food, though even so the soup “acquired a new, mysterious power to stimulate and strengthen their poor and sick”.

One day Babette receives a letter telling her that she has won the French lottery – an enormous sum of ten thousand francs. She asks the sisters for a favour – that she cook them and their parishioners a French dinner, paying for it herself. The luxury is shocking to the old ladies, but the request is granted. When the wonderful meal is cooked and the wine is poured, the only guest who knows its true culinary worth is General Loewenhielm, the dashing young army officer who had once almost been a lover, and now grown old and experienced in the things of the world. As he drinks the wine, he says to his neighbor from the village, “But surely this is a Veuve Cliquot 1860?” His neighbor looked at him kindly, smiled at him and made a remark about the weather.’ Yet the feast brings about a miraculous change in the little puritan church, riven by ancient arguments and disagreements. But first there is a speech from the General, though nobody actually understands it. It is about grace.

“In our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite.... But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another!”

Then the miracle happens, though perhaps they are all a little drunk on the wonderful food and wine, for no-one quite remembers the evening.

They only knew that the rooms had been filled with a heavenly light, as if a number of small halos had blended into one glorious radiance. Taciturn old people received the gift of tongues; ears that for years had been almost deaf were opened to it. Time itself had merged into eternity. Long after midnight the windows of the house shone like gold, and golden song flowed out into the winter air.²⁷

And they dance. Perhaps they were just drunk, or perhaps....

Babette remains an exile. She cannot go back to Paris – which to her is a lost world: and her money has all been spent on the one great feast, a dinner for twelve that would have cost the same at the Café Anglais – a price unimaginable in its extravagance to the two elderly sisters by the Norwegian Fjord. But Babette, the cook, is an artist, and the story ends with the words of one of the sisters.

“Yet this is not the end! I feel, Babette, that this is not the end. In Paradise you will be the great artist God meant you to be! Ah!” she added, the tears streaming down her cheeks. “Ah, how you will enchant the angels.”²⁸

I have left out so much in this simple, complex, many-layered parable. I think of Babette and the two elderly sisters, deprived by their minister father of the loves of their lives, living among the joyless sect that has renounced the pleasures of this world. And I think of the church of tomorrow. Art in Dinesen’s story gives her the vision without which the church will perish: to spend all recklessly on the great feast that will transform lives and bring us the grace that we hardly understand – that which we have chosen and that which we have rejected all poured out for us in abundance. Without caring for tomorrow, for time will merge into eternity. Tomorrow; but today we have the finances to balance, the strategy to plan, for that is only sensible, though perhaps without sense.

More than ten years ago I wrote a book on some of the world’s greatest artists, excessive in their way, feasting on prayer and radical Christians – the ancient

²⁷ Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), *Babette’s Feast and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2013) pp. 60–61.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Christian father and mothers of the desert, and I close this evening with the words that ended that book, written shortly after the war in Iraq, the Desert Storm.

And when the emperor has gone and been forgotten and the demons whom he sent his army to defeat have moved on to occupy another place in the fertile human imagination, I imagine that there may be one or perhaps two gentle folk of common sense left, who matter so little that they have been forgotten by the world, to the point that they are entirely other than all its concerns, and for that very reason... human life will be preserved and honoured by God.²⁹

Those gentle folk, artists like Babette, are my vision of the church of tomorrow.

²⁹ David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 187.

Ill-treated Traditions of Oral Communication: Two Lecterns Lament, Then Offer Hope for Their Speakers

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Prologue

Imagine that two lecterns, platforms from which speakers address audiences, correspond (if lecterns could think and had hands with which to write), for they are old friends, having been crafted in the same workshop. One writes from a room in an ancient university building, the site of seminars, meetings, classes, conference presentations. The other writes from an ancient church across town, the site of worship gatherings, concerts, ceilidhs, lectures, tours and more. With such varied activities, there is always much to write about, though one theme is more often present than not: lament. For each lectern's purpose is to facilitate oral communication, the meeting of humans to share ideas, tell and listen to stories, explore theories, tussle with passion various perspectives and possibilities. 'She did not look up – another one, so often it's the same problem.' 'His audience were disengaged for most of the lecture, the language just wasn't right at all.' 'Do they care about what they're saying – if they don't why *should* anyone listen?' 'Have they no respect for the listeners, for their subject, for me?! I am so disheartened' 'I feel misused; their speaking traditions are so ill-treated.' 'Do they prepare for reading these stories that apparently mean so much to their community?'

What might these two lecterns say, if they could speak to the crowds that gather, the humans that stand behind them to address their fellow humans? How might their speakers be helped to understand these speaking traditions as moments of oral communication, and better prepare to communicate effectively, more expertly engage with their audiences, traditions, from the platform each lectern provides?

Introduction

As an oral storyteller and scholar,² I regularly experience continuing oral practices that are often mistreated and thus ineffective as communication events. For both

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the reading of the Bible aloud and the conference or seminar presentation of our lecterns' laments are indeed oral communication events. According to Austin's speech-act theory, both events feature speaking and listening, along with accepted conventions guiding who speaks, for how long, how content is structured, how responses are given and what a speaker wears (Austin 1962). It often seems as though speakers in these contexts are missing some point about the mode of communication in which they are engaged. For the language employed in conference presentations can be difficult for the ear to receive; the tone employed for proclaiming sacred texts amidst one's faith community might lack appreciation for the depth of meaning to be found there. In these, and other ways, such failure to understand and properly prepare for such oral communication moments leads to varying degrees of inappropriate and ineffective practice. This article takes up our imagined lecterns' laments for two traditions of oral communication in which I participate; and in the style of lament, will move towards hope for change.

Two Ill-treated Traditions

Our two lecterns represent two speech-acts that go unrecognised; as such, proponents of the traditions of reading the Bible aloud and conference presentations become inefficient in their attempt to communicate, and neither speaker nor listener comes away from the encounter gaining much at all. It is surprising that speakers are so apparently unaware of these encounters as oral communication moments that use body, emotion, eye contact, and voice modulation as much as the words themselves, to communicate meaning. Humans communicate thus in every day encounters with one another, it is intrinsic to our being human (Kemp 2012: 34).

From my experience, Bible readers in worship (my context is protestant reformed traditions, the Uniting Church in Australia and the Church of Scotland) are generally chosen from among the regular members of the congregation to read anywhere between one and four passages from the Bible, most often following the pattern of the Revised Common Lectionary (though usually two or three from Old Testament, Gospel and Letters, with the Psalm for the day generally featuring in prayers or songs). Readers will lead a congregational response along the lines of 'This is the word of the Lord' – *Thanks be to God*, and will wear their usual Sunday attire as appropriate for their congregation.

² Combining the two in doctoral studies, exploring oral performance of biblical compositions for an embodied performance method of interpretation.

Also from my experience,³ seminar or conference presenters are chosen by committee from written proposals submitted according to conference guidelines, usually speak for 20 to 45 minutes, with 5 to 20 minutes for questions from the audience, which will be moderated by a third party, and they will be dressed in appropriately professional clothing.

So much for the setting of these two practices as speech-act events (Austin 1962). In these events, however, the practitioners of both consistently do not approach these practices *as* oral communication events. By this I mean that a lack of awareness of these practices as moments of *live embodied communication* inhibits the effectiveness of those moments to meaningfully communicate the intended message of the speaker, because the full range of tools for oral communication are not employed.

For those reading the Bible, I argue that the speaker will often have paid too little attention to the message and to the means of communicating that message, failing to regard themselves as the mediator of communication between God and God's people. For those speaking at seminars and conferences, I argue that the speaker will have paid very close attention to their message, but have approached the task of communicating in the manner of writing an article for written publication. In this way, they have failed to regard the live embodied communication moment as a unique mode of communication, and have not taken advantage of the opportunity it presents.

Let us consider each in turn in further detail, before finding our way to hope for improved practice.

Tradition 1: Reading the Bible Aloud

The first tradition is that of reading the Bible aloud. Reading the Bible aloud is, in my experience, one of the most frustrating moments in a church service. Churchgoers, without necessarily understanding why, often cite the reading of the Bible as the least engaging element of gathered worship.

A typical Bible reading might proceed in this manner: The reading is announced, one more item on a to do list, mechanically ticked off – ‘and now Jo Bloggs will bring us our Bible readings.’ The rostered worship leader or Bible reader gets up and walks to the microphone. They may have looked at the passage beforehand. They may bring their own Bible, a print-out, or use a congregational

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Bible that has been processed in. The microphone might need adjusting, there may be some fumbling with books and pages. There may be some grace and poise following preparation before the service commenced. It is possible that the reader will look up, a quick glance while they give the book, chapter and verses and maybe the page number for the pew Bible. They read aloud the words from the page, looking up rarely and so briefly as to not make eye contact, if they look up at all. The tone may carry some expressiveness, but will more likely be 'reverent', monotonous or hesitant, with emphasis on words that ought not be emphasized, stumbling over words and names not rehearsed, emotion left out of the reading all together. They offer the accepted refrain, and begin to walk away from the lectern as the congregation speaks their response.

This will vary from church to church and from person to person, of course. Also variable is when the reader will be informed of which passages are to be read – early in the week, the day before, even on the day – and how much preparation has gone into the reading. A reader may have glanced over the passages silently, been reminded of familiar passages and assumed 'I know what that's about.' Far too rarely will a reader engage in a committed, repeated rehearsal of the texts aloud, noting questions, checking commentaries, or conversing with the preacher for the themes they will highlight in the sermon. All these things, if carried out, will inform the reader of meaning in the text for *this* audience, on *this* occasion.⁴

Churches the world over hear the Bible read every time they gather, but do they think of this as a tradition of *oral* communication, worthy of considered attention for its particular elements? For example, who speaks? Very often the reading is given as a way of 'letting' someone participate, a child, a guest,⁵ someone who participates reluctantly. In the early church, to read the Bible aloud was considered a responsibility to be given to those with the gift of reading *aloud*, of appropriate reflection, of effective oral delivery which includes gesture, posture, personal integrity and emotion (Shiner 2003: 47).

The Bible is understood by the church to be the word of God, God revealed, a sacred inheritance, but do readers (and congregations) expect God to *be* revealed when they speak these words aloud? Too often I am led to wonder if a given reader considers that their hearts be open to God; that their minds and hearts understand what this passage means and might be saying to these listeners, today. Too often

⁴ Storytellers like Ray Buckley expect any story to be different each time it is told (2003: 88).

⁵ Both children and guests do, however, have the potential to be effective oral communicators in reading the Bible aloud; the lack of consideration of this capacity in one invited to read is the point here.

readers simply articulate words off a page without taking them within themselves any further than from eye to mouth (Childers 1998: 79).

To whom are we speaking? Reader, I address you now: this community gathered, do you know them? See them? Love them?⁶ Do you think of them as you prepare, and care at all about how these words might offer hope, comfort, challenge, or an invitation to meet the Sacred? (Childers 2008: 165).

With our two imagined lecterns, my lament is deep, because too often it appears that these questions are not asked, such attention is not given, and we would be better not to read the Bible aloud in church at all, than to suffer through such haphazard interpretations.

Tradition 2: Delivering an Academic Paper

The second tradition is that of delivering an academic paper. I also inhabit the world of academia, as a university teacher and PhD candidate. I attend seminars and conferences, and see oral communication moments time and time again not reaching their potential to communicate. These oral presentations tend to have a feeling of being disembodied, which diminishes the essential gift of a conference or seminar *as* an embodied communication moment. In such a moment, one brings one's whole self to the task, as a physical, emotional and relational being. But I observe many a seminar presenter entering the room and holding themselves aloof, distant. They stand behind our lamenting lectern, perhaps on a podium. They have sheaves of A4 paper, to which their gaze is directed for at least 90 percent of the time. The audience need not be in the room for all the attention they receive from the speaker. There is little connection, no relationship at all between speaker and listeners.⁷

Seminar presenters speak fast, read a paper as if they are *reading* not *speaking* – this is a difference many seem not to notice in their own practice, but will experience as a listener. The pace, tone, and connection to the audience is livelier and engaging, and it is easier for the audience to hear and to receive meaningfully what is spoken, if we speak, paradoxically, in a less polished manner. Using formal academic language that is suited to the eye, not the ear, a speaker places a significant stumbling block between them and their listeners. The listeners would understand more from silently reading the paper for themselves if the body's ability to communicate by using and experiencing gestures, expressions and emotions, is not employed at all (Zielinski 2001: 36). In particular, seminar

⁶ Storyteller Ray Buckley urges fellow storytellers to love their audience (2003: 85).

⁷ Buckley's observation that 'storytelling is a relationship between the speaker and the listener' applies equally to any form of oral communication (2003: 69).

presenters seem to leave their emotions at the door; perhaps because of nerves, perhaps the sense of the formality of the occasion. But when someone presents with a smile, with enthusiasm, with joy in their work and delight in their research, they convince their audience of the importance of a topic they might generally think uninteresting. Emotion communicates more powerfully than thinking ever will (Shiner 2003: 57ff).

The oral presentation is a mode of communication, which brings the whole human person into contact with other humans in a way journal articles do not. Without the live emotional response of the author, without their tone and emphasis and pause, without the gestures of a speaker, the words must do more for themselves in a journal article to communicate effectively. They are necessarily crafted with more complex sentences, using more formal language suitable for the page, from which the eye can receive the greater amount of more detailed information in such a way as to spark their own imagination for tone and pace and movement. To approach a conference presentation as an article may be expedient in terms of time if one will be seeking also to publish it in print; but it makes for disembodied and ineffective communication in an embodied context. To prepare a presentation without due attention to the position one takes behind the lectern, before a live audience, is a missed opportunity at the very least.

Example and Encouragement: Letters from the Author

To the reader: There is something at the heart of the tradition of reading the Bible aloud that I wish to explore with those practitioners. Conference speakers, feel free to 'listen' in.

When, as a reader, you approach the preparation of a biblical portion for reading aloud in the gathered community as a chore or one more item on the to do list of gathered worship, you are treating one of the most enduring traditions of the Judeo-Christian tradition⁸ with disrespect. Simply remembering that this is a long-held tradition, valued and continued in communities of faith all over the world, will help bring a measure of respect to the moment. Recalling that these are the writings we hold sacred because the God we believe in and follow is made known in our encounters with those writings, will renew your sense of awe for the occasion.

⁸ Larry Hurtado's *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Ancient World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017) highlights the uniqueness of this practice of reading scripture aloud – even *having* written sacred texts – in the Jewish and Christian communities. See also Hurtado's interview for the Centre for the Study of Christian Origins: <http://www.christianorigins.div.ed.ac.uk/2016/09/21/pt-4-professor-hurtado-on-destroyer-of-the-gods/>).

There is, however, a kind of reverence readers can sometimes bring to the speaking aloud of the scriptures that is not so helpful. A kind of reverence that seems to assume that a voice devoid of any expression or emotion – devoid of the self of the speaker – is required to demonstrate devotion. No. Have a look at those stories Jesus tells, and notice the emotion inherent in them; encounter his character, the charismatic, compassionate, passionate teacher. Having life to its fullness (Jesus' gift to his followers, John 10:10) incorporates the fullness of our emotions, our identities and stories and experiences. *Bring* all that to the sacred texts, and let it speak to the story you will be speaking aloud – this will evoke meaning for your time. Acknowledging that God is made known through these words handed on through the generations might make a speaker nervous for a number of reasons. Am I worthy to offer my voice as a medium for God to speak? Will God challenge me, move me, transform me beyond what I know and beyond any comfort? To speak the words of the Bible aloud is to make yourself vulnerable. To speak aloud in any context is to make yourself vulnerable, for the voice is an intimate revealer of our deepest self (Childers 1998: 58). In preparing to read the Bible aloud, then, the reader must come to terms with yourself, must give time for the words to do their work in you, so that you understand some meaning that you can speak from your heart.

It is a work of prayer, as much as it is a work of public speaking. An openness to a kind of composition, which holds a particular and revered place in your community. Prayer is time, prayer is attention, prayer is presence with God, with story, with our neighbours. This is the key to reading the Bible aloud in such a way as to *say* something meaningful, rather than merely articulating words at the appropriate moment in the order of service.

To the speaker: Readers, there are elements of conference presentation that may inform your own practice, so remain tuned in as I now address those who engage in this practice. When, as a scholar, you approach the preparation of conference papers as you would the writing of a journal article, you assume that when you stand before an audience you will probably offer complicated, academically rigorous arguments *and language*, so that you *must read* from the page if you are not to stumble. However, just as it is possible to preach from notes or full manuscript in an engaged manner, it is possible to present rigorous and academically sound arguments in an engaging manner – by rehearsing the text aloud.⁹

⁹This 'is an excellent way to strengthen one's sensitivity to textual nuances, questions and connotation ... to its "problems" and "opportunities"' (Childers 2008: 163).

With the technical nature of your material requiring significant adherence to a script, you are likely to direct your eyes downwards for most of the presentation. As I observe in church readers, presenters will also snatch glances from the page, because we've been told at some time or other to "make eye contact" – but these snatched glances rarely connect with a member of the audience (Zielinski 2001: 37; Buckley 2003: 85). Perhaps a presenter will break from the page for an anecdote or further explanation. My ear delights in these moments, welcoming this change of language, for it is so much more appropriate *for* the ear. Linguists will tell us that different language suits different purposes. Such attention to language will make great improvements to many a conference paper, if nothing else in these suggestions is adopted. For a written article, formal academic language is entirely appropriate. The eye has time to take it in, to process, to return and reread as necessary.

For an oral presentation, informal language – which can yet maintain academic rigour – is much more appropriate. Shorter sentences with less complex structure and language. Repetition. By employing such techniques, you will communicate more effectively, because the words you speak will be easier for your listeners' ears to receive. It is important, if you wish to communicate effectively, to recognise the mode of communication and proceed accordingly. Further improvements can be made by writing into your transcript places to pause. The listener needs time for information to settle before moving on to more (Buckley 2003: 86). Consider the size of the type for ease of reading, to facilitate a smoother delivery, more confident movement of eyes from page to listeners. Consider the size of the page, especially if not using a lectern. It may take some courage, but stepping away from a lectern can improve connection with your audience, with less to physically come between you. Using A4 size paper negates any benefit in such an instance. In my own practice, I use a small e-reader, A5 size, no-shine screen, not a touch screen. This means I can read easily, don't scroll too far and lose my place, and the e-reader is not much bigger than my hand, so there is very little between my audience and me.¹⁰

Not all who participate in these oral communication moments will be comfortable in such contexts, although it is an accepted, and to a certain extent required, element of academic life. So if standing behind a lectern will put you at ease, use a lectern – they are there to help you. If you are at ease, your audience will be at ease, and communication is more likely to be meaningful. Please, dear presenter, do not sit at a desk if you are physically able to stand, and try not to read

¹⁰ Confidence is a strange beast – not enough, and your nerves risk inhibiting communication; too much, and your arrogance risks inhibiting communication.

from a laptop. It has been my experience that, even more than a lectern, a laptop puts an instant physical barrier between you and your listeners, especially if you are sitting at a table. Sitting, you are more likely to close your body, which is unhelpful for speaking clearly; a closed body also gives the impression that you do not want to be there, and this is an invitation to your audience to disengage.

Before you come to the presentation itself, read your paper aloud several times, so you know what you are saying, and can hear the way the language is reaching the ear. Have your audience in mind from the point of composition and through rehearsal, considering what you want to say to *this* group of people in *this* moment (Buckley 2001: 77–78). Although in a different context, it is evident in the way he crafted his plays that the excellent shaper of embodied oral communication moments, William Shakespeare, relied on knowledge of his audience in determining his use of language, not only considering *what* he wanted to communicate with his audience, but *how* they would receive and appreciate what his characters had to say (Raffel 1996: 205). The effectiveness of his communication ability is clear in the endurance of his works.

Connect with your topic, find what you care about in it, and let your emotion show. It will communicate more than your words. Show your passion, joy, delight, and others will feel it too, and listen even more intently. You have your audience before you, and therefore can use more than the words themselves to communicate. Do not be afraid, you do this every day, for you are human, and this is how we communicate (Hamilton 2003). What happens when you give positive expression and engage with your audience is that your audience's attention gives *you* more energy, further enhancing your delivery, helping your audience stay connected and convinced by what you are saying (Hamilton 2003). Communication takes two (or more). Remember that you are not alone on stage, however alone and exposed you may feel up there at the lectern. Bring your audience with you, and you will be in this together.

I know it saves time to write the presentation as you would for submission to a journal – do it once and there is little rewriting for a different context. But consider what you are losing, compromising, when you fail to shape your work for the mode of communication.¹¹ You have a live embodied audience with you in a presentation, and there are elements of communication available to you that you cannot access through a journal article. There, you have only words, and so academic language is employed to convey your meaning. In a live presentation you

¹¹ Studies of orality and oral tradition have reminded us of the difference in function and purpose of written and oral texts. See, for example, Ong (1975); Hearon (2006: 20).

have your whole self, body, emotion, presence. Your emotion, for example, is much more palatable in person than on the page of an academic paper: connect through emotion and inspire your audience. Your eyes, the eyes of your audience, are disconnected from each other in a journal article; here, you can meet others in the eye and connect. Meet people in the eye before you begin, arrive early and get set up, then you are free to greet those who are arriving and taking their seats in the audience (Bristol-Smith 2001: 78). This is an underestimated tool for connecting and putting you and your listeners at ease. You establish relationship, and when you open your mouth to speak, it is much more likely to feel like continuing conversation with people than an intimidating 'presentation' to a room full of strangers (Buckley 2001: 85).

Hope for Well-treated Oral Communication Traditions

Thus, we find our way to hope, in the joy of these mutually embodied moments and the rich opportunity for connection they offer. Humans gathered together for the sharing of knowledge, for encouraging growth in understanding and wellbeing.

What might our lecterns say to you, if they could speak for themselves? How might they advise you on ways to improve your oral communication practice, in these vital moments for human connection and communication? Did you notice a thread, a repeated exhortation, throughout our discussions so far? Prepare yourself with due attention for the task at hand. Know to whom you are speaking, consider carefully how you will speak, prepare to communicate with all that you bring to that oral communication moment. Prepare; prepare; prepare.

What Would the Lecterns Say?

If our lecterns *could* speak to you, the speakers who stand behind them, their advice would centre around preparation.

Preparation. As you prepare, hold your audience in mind – what do you want *these* people to hear as you speak to them in this moment?

Language. Use language appropriate for the context. Bible readers, consider the translation most familiar to your congregation, or perhaps an adaptation to help them hear the story anew. Conference presenters, write the paper the way you might speak this material over coffee with a colleague; you would still use the technical language, but in a more informal way that is accessible to the ear.

Preparation. Read aloud beforehand, and more times than once. Know what you will be saying, even if you need the written words before you in the moment as a reminder. The better you know your words, the more you can actually *meet* people in the eye.

Tools. Have only what will help you to communicate effectively. Use a lectern if it is comfortable or the tradition of the community. Put your transcript into technology with which you are comfortable, with large print for ease of reading, small page size to minimise disruptions to connection; include notes regarding pauses, expression and gesture.

Preparation. Check microphones, water if you need it, position of the lectern, all before you begin.

Presence. If you are early enough for checking of microphones etc., you can be free to welcome people as they arrive. This will build connection and help you to feel at ease when you are speaking, inviting your listeners to be invested in what you have to say before you have even begun.

Preparation. Before you leave your seat, breathe deep, shrug your shoulders to release the tension, wiggle your feet on the ground to be connected to where you are. Don't rush to the microphone, take another breath before you speak, and sweep your eyes over all who are there. Connect.

Speak clearly. Know the first line well enough to speak it looking up at your audience: this will bring them with you from the first. Keep movements minimal.

Pause. Look at your audience. Stay long enough at the close for the moment to be complete – applause for the conference presentation, responses for the church reading.

Preparation. Prepare well, and you will engage with your tradition successfully, will communicate effectively, having connected with your audience so that they feel and thus believe that what you have said rings true.

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Book Reviews

NAIM STIFAN ATEEK. *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017). Pages xx + 172. ISBN 978-1-62698-260-4. £12.71 (paperback).

Naim Ateek, an Anglican Priest and Canon of St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, is the doyen of Palestinian theologians. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre in 1990, and led its work through its first decades. Sabeel is a movement concerned with Christian formation and education, not least for young people and women, rather than an academic or clerical institution. Its theology is nonetheless both contextualised and informed by developments in critical Biblical scholarship.

This is Ateek's third monograph. Rather than rehearsing his appropriation and application in previous volumes of critical reconstructions of the biblical tradition and the history behind it, this book is a more comprehensive introduction to readers outside Palestine of the theological quest, and its context. It treats briefly the Palestinian Christians, and their history under foreign occupation, and events leading to the present situation.

In turning to the biblical texts, Ateek is candid about the difficulty for Palestinian Christians in reading certain passages in Scripture, especially those which seem to glorify genocide, legitimate slavery, and provide the pretext for their dispossession by Zionist invaders over the past century. In response to these challenges, Ateek draws on the findings of archaeology and history that the narrative of conquest, genocide, dispossession, and enslavement is at best an incomplete account of social, economic, and political developments in ancient Canaan which saw Israel emerge from a variety of ethnic and tribal entities. He offers too the hermeneutical principle that the Old Testament is to be measured against the standard of Christ; anything contrary to the Gospel teaching reflects at best an early, inadequate, and obsolete stage in the human quest to discern God's purposes in the world. Above all, God is not a tribal deity, but the creator of the world and redeemer of all humanity.

In turning to the present situation, Ateek does not merely provide an account of the "theological scene" and the work of Sabeel, he invites the reader to become part of it. It is of course not for outsiders to set the theological agenda, or to prescribe how Palestinian Christians should respond in faith to their context. But he does call upon Christians around the world to stand in solidarity with the Christians of Palestine, and with the work of Sabeel.

For more detailed engagement with scholarship, readers would need to refer back to Ateek's earlier *Justice, and Only Justice*. A fuller engagement with the current situation, and the theological articulation of the way of non-violent resistance to the occupation, can be found in *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*. This book may be academically less satisfying, in that it provides less original critical interaction with scholarship. But it is comprehensive in outlining the context in which Palestinian liberation theology is being worked out in Christian communities under occupation, the challenges in interpreting Scripture, and the difficulties in articulating and implementing any non-violent strategy.

There is no hint of anti-Semitism in this book, or elsewhere in Ateek's writings. He is, if anything, sensitive to Jewish history and its tragedies, and generous in recognising the permanence of the Jewish presence, if not the Zionist political system, in Palestine.

The call to Christians around the world to stand in solidarity with those of Palestine is unequivocal and it is urgent. The challenge to the Scottish Episcopal Church is how to respond.

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ROBERT A. GILLIES. *Approaching the Cross: John's Gospel Witness to Jesus Dying and Rising* (Haddington: Handsel Press, 2017). Pages 90. ISBN 978-1-91205-241-7. £6.95 (paperback).

Robert Gillies, former Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney, has written a lucid and deeply pastoral book. This series of meditative expositions offers us, as the title suggests, not only an insight into the events of Holy Week and Easter, but also, as is so often the case, an insight into Gillies's own spiritual and theological make up. This slim volume is replete with examples from Gillies's own personal experience and ministry, which helpfully grounds the text, saving it from the risk of appearing, as it were, spiritually rarefied.

Not that one has to look too far for profundities, and these, once again, are often revealed in the personal experience of Gillies, himself. For example, the hard recognition of Jesus's death as the precursor to what Gillies calls, the 'empty future' is illustrated from Gillies's own personal history and ministry to telling effect, and shows that, as Gillies himself says, 'to have faith means one has to live out the consequences of that faith'.

Raymond Brown, some time ago, made the point that the key to any understanding of the events of Holy Week is to relate the intention conveyed by the evangelists (as far as we can perceive this) without falling into the temptation to idolise contemporary relevance. Any modern meaning therefore, must honour the biblical material and the context within which it was produced. Gillies recognises this and, while unashamedly positing a broadly conservative approach, seeks to provide the reader with the necessary socio-historical and theological evidence in order that we might more faithfully navigate this last critical week of the Messiah. In this vein, and without overwhelming the reader, he offers helpful background material to enable further study.

There is a certain sense in which it is difficult to say anything “new” about this old, old story; and this might be said of all theological endeavour. However, Gillies does offer us some refreshing insights. For example, his reading of the place of Judas at the Last Supper and the implications that flow from this give us pause to reflect once more on notions of judgement and redemption; destiny and human freedom. Another first, for this reviewer at least, is the mention of Lady Gaga in a devotional text written by a bishop of the church! This last example actually gets to the heart of the book, which is the desire to passionately communicate the purposes of the passion itself. His adoption of art, music and poetry as a means of breaking the shattering silence induced by the events of Christ’s last days, is as welcome as it is necessary.

This is a book to be taken slowly and steadily and is therefore one which would be more than useful as the basis of a Lent Group Study. Overall, it falls into the tradition of Anglican devotional literature which is built on a balanced appreciation of both Scripture and scholarly endeavour.

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GILBERT MÁRKUS. *Conceiving a Nation: Scotland to AD 900* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017). Pages xiv, 295. ISBN 978-0-74867-899-0. £19.99 (paperback).

When writing a history of the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC), where do you begin? 1690 is a logical point, the beginning of its separate identity when the Church of Scotland divided into Episcopalian and Presbyterian parts. The standard history of the SEC used in the second half of the twentieth century, by Frederick Goldie (1951), began with the division between Reformed and Roman branches of the Scottish

church in 1560, as did JP Lawson in *The Episcopal Church in Scotland* (1844). More recently Gavin White's fragmentary history (1998) started in 1750 when the failure of the '45 meant that the Episcopal Church lost the hope of returning to its pre-1690 place as the national church and Gerald Stranraer-Mull's fine short history (2013), which is on the Provincial website, starts with the battle of Flodden in 1513. Given this variety and the manifest continuity through all these dates, it is perhaps best to begin a history of the SEC at the beginning of Christianity in what is now Scotland. All other dates are just steps along the way. The history of Edinburgh diocese on its website does just this and begins with one of the earliest Christian burials in the Lothians, of a British woman called Vetta around AD 500. Nothing else is known of Vetta. This illustrates the difficulties of studying early historic Scotland, a field where there have been huge developments in the last couple of decades, and that is where Gilbert Márkus's excellent book comes in.

Conceiving a Nation is part of a re-writing of the eight volume *New History of Scotland*, edited by the late Jenny Wormald, and it replaces Alfred Smyth's *Warlords and Holy Men* (1984). There are no footnotes and it is designed as an introduction for the general reader as well as for student, but it is an excellent synthesis of the latest scholarship written by someone who has himself made a major contribution in this field. It is a general history, not a history of the Church, but each of the six chapters begins with a quote from the Psalms which reminds us that, after conversion, Christianity permeated the whole of society and all educated people would have memorised the Psalms. This is primarily a social and cultural history and it complements the excellent volumes of a more narrative history of the period by James Fraser and Alex Woolf in the *New Edinburgh History of Scotland*. What is exciting about Márkus's book is the way in which he demolishes old myths that have disappeared from academia but which still linger in the popular consciousness. Read this book and your view of the Scotland of 'the Celtic Church' will never be the same again.

Its opening words set the scene: 'This book purports to be a "history of Scotland" until AD 900. It is therefore the history of a country that did not exist' (vii). During this period in the area that is now Scotland we find Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the south, Gaels in the West, Picts in the Centre and North and the Norse arriving in the North and West. Between all these groups there was much cultural exchange. One theme of the book is the inadequacy of an ethno-nationalist view of history. What is now Scotland was produced from the interpenetration of a number of cultures that were themselves fluid and not racially based, aided by a common Latin and Roman Christianity. One example of this process is found in the analysis of the poem *Y Gododdin*, written in British (Welsh) and describing a failed raid by British warriors from Din Eidyn (Edinburgh) on the Anglo-Saxons at Catraeth

(Catterick). Márkus notes that ‘we must abandon the old image of a titanic struggle between Celt and Saxon’ (74) and notes that the Prince of Din Eidyn was probably the son of a Saxon called Wulfstan: ‘the terms ‘British’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in this context refer to an ethnic style (e.g. burial types) and not to any racial characteristics’ (72). The proximate source of this myth of ethnic conflict may be found in nineteenth-century racist nationalism but its remote cause is in Bede’s mental map of Britain and even earlier in the polemics of Gildas. One theme of this book is the criticism of ancient written sources, often on the basis of archaeological evidence. Bede and others are accused of being under the sway of an ancient literary concept of ethnogenesis, rooted in the *Aeneid* and the Pentateuch, a group with a leader that travels and conquers the land for which they are destined. Against this there is, for example, no archaeological evidence for a transfer of material culture from Ireland to the West of Scotland AD c. 500. Thus the Gaels did not invade Scotland but there was a common culture in this area in which Gaelic evolved, something which is not surprising when one realises that the northern Irish Sea was not a barrier but a route way and the real barrier was the mountains of Druim Alban that separated the West of Scotland from the East. Likewise the Picts did not come from Scythia (this was an ironic by-product of Pictish clergy reading Virgil) and the Picts did not ‘disappear’. The evidence suggests that Pictish power spread westwards, Walafrid Strabo said in 835 that Iona was ‘on the shore of the Picts’ (247), while place names and other evidence suggests that Gaelic language and culture spread eastwards. Thus, contrary to popular history, Cinnaid mac Ailpín (Kenneth MacAlpine) did not conquer the Picts and found Scotland; Cinnaid was a King of the Picts. The transformation of Pictland into Alba/Scotia/Scotland was ‘the triumph of a language not a Kingdom’ and ‘a rebranding of some subtlety’ (267). Similarly the ending of Norse attacks on Iona after 825 is explained not by the flight of the monastic community to Ireland but to the monks building relations with their new overlords and the Norse gradually adopting Christianity and Gaelic culture. The new picture here is of the Kingdom of the Picts adopting a Gaelic culture and gradually absorbing Gael, Briton, Saxon and Norse to form the medieval Kingdom of the Scots.

As this new scholarship contradicts a racial nationalism, so it also undermines a religious nationalism. For centuries Scottish ecclesiastical history has been written on denominational lines with an eye on contemporary church polity, whether Presbyterian, Episcopalian or Roman Catholic. There has also been a romantic Celticism exploited by all denominations and chronicled by Ian Bradley in his *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh, 1999). Márkus shows that Scottish Christianity is Roman in origin and is part of the expansion of the faith through the Empire and beyond, where *Romanitas* was still valued. If you doubt the centrality of *Romanitas*, think of the Picts reading Virgil and the Roman

values shown in the fifth-century writings of St Patrick. Columba did not bring Christianity to Scotland in 563, nor did he convert the Picts. Archaeology suggests that when he visited the Pictish King Bridei near modern Inverness, there was already an established Pictish monastery at Portmahomack on the Tarbat peninsula. Christianity in Scotland began as and remained part of the Latin Church of Western Europe because Britain 'was not separated from the continent by water; it was connected to it by water' (3). Márkus follows all good modern scholarship in being clear that there was no such thing as the 'Celtic church', only Catholic Christians who spoke Celtic languages. These Christians were no less Roman or Augustinian than their Anglo-Saxon neighbours to the South and their Churches were led by Bishops in the same way as the rest of Europe. The church was not, however, centralised in the way of modern Roman Catholicism, Márkus speaks of 'a fluid and improvised pattern of overlapping jurisdictions' in Britain (140), but all were consciously in communion with the Bishop of Rome. The idea that the 'Celtic Church' was monastic and not episcopal, loved by Presbyterian polemicists, is shown to come from a misreading of some comments on Iona by Bede. The controversy over the date of Easter is at the heart of the old model of Celt versus Anglo-Saxon. Márkus explains the issues with remarkable clarity and shows how Bede (again!) gave the controversy its political spin. The term 'Celtic church' trips off the tongue much more easily than 'the Church in Early Medieval Scotland' but reading this book, and especially chapter 2 on the church, will change your understanding of early Christianity in Scotland.

At the start of this review I mentioned Vetta, the otherwise unknown fifth-century Christian woman buried on the site of Edinburgh airport. It is hard to discover the history of women in this early period, although legal texts do enable us to see groups of people who are hidden in other forms of written evidence such as children, slaves and women. There is a modern myth that 'Celtic Christianity' was female-friendly. Márkus's chapter on law, where he looks at evidence from all the cultural groups, reveals that this was not so. In Gaelic society women were *báeth* (senseless and unable to act legally except in a few closely defined circumstances) and a woman was unable to enter contracts independently of her *cenn* ('head', a male guardian). As with the pseudo-Christian doctrine of headship found in some parts of the Church today, this cultural expression of male dominance was given theological justification, as in this unconvincing argument from an early Irish canonical text: women cannot give evidence 'because the Apostles did not accept the evidence of women concerning the resurrection of Christ' (223). Women had a higher social and legal position in Anglo-Saxon society and it is significant that the only female monastery for which we have good evidence in this period in Scotland is the Northumbrian Coldingham where Abbess Aebba presided over a community

of men and women. In considering the scanty evidence about Pictish society we are introduced to recent research that strongly criticises the theory that Pictish society was matrilineal (tracing inheritance on the female side), another myth for which Bede is partly responsible.

Amidst the chapters on culture, politics and the church, there is one on a single figure. One might expect this to be Columba but it is in fact his biographer and successor, Adamnán. This is because only with this writer and Abbot of Iona can we form an impression of the personality of someone from this period, 'even a saint like Columba remains an idealised figure created by people writing about him after his death for their own purposes' (151). One of Adamnán's great achievements was the 'Law of the Innocents' (*Cáin Adomnáin*), promulgated in 697 on the centenary of Columba's death. This gave protection to children, women, clergy and churches in a violent culture and is a prime example of one theme of this book, how Christianity influenced or failed to influence cultures. The Christian tradition of equality made little impact on societies with legal traditions that awarded different values according to one's place in the social hierarchy. The Church also generally lived in peace with the institution of slavery, where a slave had no human value but was rather regarded as a unit of currency. The Church also found its place among existing customs, for example children were entrusted to priests and monasteries as well as to the halls of Lords and baptism created a web of spiritual kinship among the bonds of natural kinship.

The book ends with King Constantin son of Áed (d.952) but has no conclusion tying together its many strands. It is a pleasure to read but one might ask, why does all this matter, is it not just arcana for academics? The answer is that history is not neutral, as Orwell said, 'he who controls the past controls the future; he who controls the present controls the past'. It is to our advantage as Christians to have access to the latest scholarly analysis of our past. The religious past of Scotland has been used again and again for present gain, all the main denominations dedicated churches in the last two centuries to great saints of this period like Columba to legitimate their claims to be the true Scottish church. Earlier, the sixteenth-century Protestant humanist, George Buchanan created the myth of a non-Roman 'Celtic church' to support the new Protestant establishment. If, as has been suggested by Thomas Clancy, the cult of St Ninian is rooted in a scribal error when writing the name of another saint, Uinniau, and was used as a way of legitimating the extension of Northumbrian power, one may ask whether the cult of Ninian should be suppressed and churches dedicated to him should be re-named. On the other hand, the way stories are passed on is itself history. Those ministering in Scotland today need to have a grasp of the Christian history of their land so they can see through inherited errors and draw inspiration from the Christians who went

before them. This book draws attention away from heroes and saints to ordinary Christians, it shows how Scottish Christianity is a part of the European mainstream not an ethnic peculiarity, it shows how the gospel haltingly and imperfectly transforms cultures, it also shows how this past is common to all Christians in Scotland and is not the preserve of any denomination. As such it is fitting to start a history of the SEC with those anonymous Christians who came North in the wake of the legions.

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Jock Stein. *Commentary* (Haddington: Handsel Press, 2017). Pages 32. ISBN 978-1-91205-240-0. £5.00 (paperback).

Publishing houses have had a hard time of things over recent years. Smaller, more homely outfits have been swallowed up by larger brutes eager to take those rich pickings that were the fare of more locally based personable and careful operations.

The Handsel Press has long stood for this friendlier and more familiar publishing tradition and is to be commended for this first booklet in a projected series of poetry output. Based in East Lothian, Church of Scotland minister, Jock Stein, has twenty-two of his poems now available within one cover.

As the title suggests, Stein offers us thoughtful reflections on much that any of us might encounter any day. Be that the 'Tax Haven' that is Guernsey or the equality at sea level humanity when some are refugees and others of us are not. Theological motifs are drawn from biblical perspectives; the rich vein that is Job 28 reflects the lonely road travelled by the miner, the bereaved of Aleppo and Aberfan, and the philosopher inside each of us.

This little collection demands our attention and will repay careful repeated thought not least where Stein's mind enters complex and intriguing conjunctions such as are to be found in his final poem in this booklet, 'Read the Signs', a reflection of Jeremiah 32:6-12 with ranging links between Babylon and Britain as the stubborn, ongoing, ploughing of hope gives a seed the hope of life. It may be in a field. It may be in a new country.

The Handsel Press is to be congratulated for this provocatively rich collection with perhaps two more to follow next year. Its launch is to be at the Carberry Festival in Dundee on 2 December 2017.

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