

In this reflection, I have been asked to do three 'simple' things – firstly, to reflect back to us what we have been sharing over these couple of days; secondly, to reflect on the implications for the shape of the church (which we started to do yesterday evening); and thirdly, to reflect on the implications for mission. It clearly is not possible to tie up all the loose ends and iron out all the creases of our conversations – and it wouldn't be very postmodern to aim to do that either. But anyway, having this opportunity to deliver a monologue at you is much more modernist than postmodernist – though I hope to leave 20 seconds for dialogue and engagement at the end!

To start with, I hope this is as helpful for you as it has been for me, but the theologian Peter Hodgson suggests that there is not one postmodernism, but probably three.¹ The first is 'radical postmodernism', the one most commonly associated with the whole thing – the idea that there are no absolute truth claims or universal meta-narratives; all claims to truth are to be treated with suspicion, including that one. I strive not to be that kind of postmodernist – though it probably does influence me. The second is counter-modernism, which comes from a frustration with all the awkward questions posed by modernism, and so retreats into the coherence of our pre-modern certainties before the Enlightenment tore them all apart. Again, I strive not to be that kind of postmodernist, and though there are features of pre-modernism which I do want to affirm (mystery, the power of story, the value of community), essentially I have no desire to deny the Enlightenment. But thirdly, critical postmodernism is the postmodernism for me: it says that the Enlightenment has given us many good questions and tools, but that its project is unfinished; it was profoundly too partial, too male, too western, too white, so the ongoing challenge of critical postmodernism is to value what has been handed to us, but to carry on searching and growing and dialoguing and being open to being transformed. This is a postmodernism which still affirms the legitimacy of meta-narrative, so long as it is a quest for liberation which actually lives up to its name – in other words, the story continues ...

I offer those three postmodernisms to you, but recommend that you choose the third!

Anyway, down to business: what have we been saying together over the course of this conference? The key thing for me, which is deeply connected with that third kind of postmodernism, is the need for the modernist division between public and private to be overcome. That old dichotomy has deeply damaged the church's integrity and its capacity to articulate and demonstrate good news. We need to re-learn how to 'go public'. The implications of this *resonate* with postmodernism (because going public is about relationship, dialogue, praxis – rather than merely theory – and sharing our stories) but it also *challenges* certain aspects of postmodernism (because while the radical postmodernists say that things are *merely* personal, to believe Christian faith is public truth is to affirm that it is *inter*-personal, that is, it is about human community, solidarity, politics, the economy, the world). Also, the methods we use in our emergent churches will be increasingly focused on equipping people to 'go public'; so whereas the old model of the preacher sermonising to the faithful leads to passive listeners who go away with ideas stuffed into their heads but without the resources to articulate it for themselves, the new models (though they might *include* and transform the old ones) will focus on conversation, confidence-building, devolved leadership,² diverse ways of learning, mystery, story, action.

¹ Peter C. Hodgson, *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot: the Mystery beneath the Real* (London: SCM, 2001), pp. 151; and Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1994), pp. 55.

² See, e.g., Kester Brewin, *The Complex Christ: Signs of emergence in the urban church* (SPCK, 2004), pp. 93.

I am aware that we've heard so many images and metaphors through the conversations so far – images about being like 'carnival', and the upside-down kingdom; or giving people a map but not prescribing the route; or the need for the church to be light on its feet, to be flexible and portable; to be like a beacon, a candle; and many more. What strikes me about images and metaphors is that they are best suited to the world of art, not the world of science, so it would be a mistake for us to try to translate these valuable metaphors into lists of actions, or a formula for success, because as we said yesterday evening, it's not like that – it's more a world of stories and experiences, where some things inexplicably work in one place even though the evidence suggests they should work somewhere else.

So even though I'm sympathetic to an evidence-based approach to things, being informed by the insights of the Enlightenment, I'm not going to outline a scientific set of proposals which I have detected through the conversations; instead, three 'transfigurations' – three issues we need to try to engage and reshape, in the light of our postmodern context. In each case, there are two implications for the shape of the church and the nature of mission:

1. The first thing that needs 'transfiguring' is our Forgetfulness.

This started out as the point that Francis made on Monday, which came originally from Grace Davie: that we live in an 'amnesic society', one that has lost the art of collective memory, so which needs the church to 'remember' on its behalf.

The fact that, in postmodern terms, there is an obsession with the immediate, wanting to feel something 'right now', to be 'in the moment', to have an authentic experience without necessarily committing to being present for the long haul, reflects this amnesia or forgetfulness. There is also a sense in which the Church has 'forgot' – the complexity of its history, with all its mixed legacies, and certain kinds of people too. So I suggest there are two things that we might focus on, as transfigurations of this forgetfulness, this loss of history, loss of who we are, loss of connection (with each other, with diverse people), to help us be more public together:

a) Remembering, that is, recalling, helping people to stay in touch with their past, including the bits we would rather forget, the messy parts of our history, the colonialism, the imperialism, the things we continually need to repent of; *and* it is about 're-membering' as in 'putting back together', building relationships, being healthier communities. In that regard, I was particularly struck by the thought that we are 'aliens in a foreign land', as pilgrims on our journey, always slightly out of kilter with the world around us, *and* that we need some digital 'natives' – in other words, we need our churches to be alien but also native, to be places where we build relationships with all kinds of people, outsider and insider, people like the Daughter of Abraham who had suffered with bleeding, located on the margins, and people like Jairus, a member of an establishment; people who *can* navigate their way round the network society, and people who cannot even access it. The point is that, to overcome our society's forgetfulness, our communities of faith need to remember what it means to be community: repentant, forgiving and radically welcoming.

b) Dreaming. Here I'm especially thinking of a powerful phrase which I came across as part of the Avaaz network, an online campaigning network, campaigning on issues of justice in many countries – someone urged its participants to 'dream wide awake'. The point is that, to be a healthy community, not one which forgets, we need to bring our past together with our hopes

and dreams for the future, so that the two impact on our practice in the present.³ It is striking that in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus tries to pray, his disciples struggle to stay awake – and one commentator has suggested that ‘staying awake’, or staying alert to the world and its suffering, is crucial for discipleship of Jesus;⁴ but we need to *dream* while we stay awake, to believe in new possibilities, but it will be hard to do this if we forget where we have come from.

2. The second thing that needs ‘transfiguring’ is Desire.

This word hasn’t been used at all over these couple of days, as far as I can remember, but it is at the heart of a consumer society. There is a post-Marxist theory called post-emotionalism⁵ which argues that the market economy is so prevalent that our desires are not really our own; they have been constructed by consumerism – it causes us to want things we might not otherwise want, and to be caught in a never-ending cycle of wanting more and more. It is wrapped up with globalisation, with the idolisation of private property, private possessions, and is all about having products – things – and desiring more of them, to give us our identity.

We need transfiguring from this, and once again the Church has two things to offer as routes away from it:

a) Gift.⁶ To emphasise that what we have is Gift, rather than something to be bought for oneself, is to emphasise something counter-cultural and healing. The gift we offer is also, we trust, ‘fullness of life’, the upside-down kingdom or carnival, which is not just for those who can afford it; in fact it is at least as much for those who cannot buy it. The nature of this gift, as grace, also frees us to risk failure, and to take risks with our own status or privileges – because the miracle of this gift is that the more we give it away, the more we receive it. So there is no longer an issue of winners and losers – in fact, this focus on Gift, on generosity, on reckless mercy and hospitality, prompts us to challenge a world which is obsessed with winners and possessions and desire.⁷

b) Process. The other thing about this Gift is that it is not a product, it is a process. As in the story Noel mentioned briefly yesterday evening (Mark 8: 22-26), where Jesus does not heal the man in Bethsaida in one attempt, but in stages, at first so that he sees people only as walking trees, but then more fully, so it is with us: the gift of grace and healing is a process. So it cannot be ‘possessed’ by us, unlike many of the things the world urges us to desire; instead it means sticking with it for the long haul, it means having ‘revolutionary patience’,⁸ it means equipping people to play their part in the process, because they should and can be equipped and they do have a part to play. It also means, as we said yesterday, that we can afford to be experimental, to try things and learn from our mistakes, because we are on a journey of discovery; we are on a spiral of reflection, action, celebration and evaluation – so let’s risk our status (as Jesus does in relationship with the marginalised woman in Mark 5), give up our anxieties about possessing certain things or strength or respectability, and trust that the gift and the goal are in the process.

³ Brewin, *Complex Christ*, p. 93.

⁴ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), pp. 346-8.

⁵ See, e.g., Stjepan Mestrovic, *Postemotional Society* (Sage, 1996)

⁶ See, e.g., Brewin, *Complex Christ*, pp.117ff.

⁷ It is not about denying that we live in a world of winners and losers, but transfiguring such inequalities according to Jesus’ principle of ‘the last shall be first and the first shall be last’.

⁸ See Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, pp. 169ff, 324ff.

3. The third thing that needs transfiguring is Indifference.

I am increasingly convinced of this – we are indifferent whenever we say, 'That's your truth, this is mine, so essentially let's not bother each other'. We do it in relation to science – 'that's your story, this is mine' – or other faiths, or economics, and politics, and so on. It really means, 'We're not interested enough in our areas of genuine difference, or disagreement, or potential common cause, or we'd rather maintain a certain kind of false innocence where we don't dirty ourselves through the messy business of dialogue, so we'll stay over here, believing what works for us, and you can stay there.'

Indifference, or relativism, needs transfiguring – again through two features of church mission:

a) Dialogue. We've emphasised it in so many ways – we need to dialogue with science, economics, politics, other faiths, expecting some mutual challenge and mutual enrichment through the process. It's about engaging and connecting; it's about recognising the complexities and fragmentations of society including in the digital world, and that we need to do better publicity, to get out there with something to say, with integrity, while also being better at listening – as individuals, and as communities.

b) Transformation. Jesus was a Jew in the prophetic jubilee tradition which meant having real moral commitments, especially for the sake of the voiceless and powerless. It was in a sense his big story, his meta-narrative, the implications of the kingdom of God for those regarded as the last and the least. Indifference says that we turn a blind eye to oppression, exclusion, racism, sexism, hunger, bigotry, prejudice, whereas if we let such indifference be transfigured, we will focus on being liberating communities, even from positions where we feel relatively weak. As John Campbell commended (in the inter-cultural Bible Study), we are called to be 'traitors to privilege'; and we are called with Jesus to challenge the Temple's dominance and exclusivity, to be people of the tabernacle instead, more simple, more portable, moving on as God's Spirit prompts us, allowing ourselves to be interrupted by God's presence particularly in those who are socially marginalised.

Those are the things I have detected, to help us become more public in our Christian witness and community-building –

- transfigure society's forgetfulness by being communities of remembering (the bad with the good, and holding all sorts of people together), and communities of dreaming;
- transfigure society's consumerist desire by being communities of gift, and communities of process;
- transfigure society's indifference and relativism, by being communities of dialogue (tough, patient dialogue), and communities of transformation, especially for the sake of the powerless.

But what do you think?

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