

THEOLOGY AND THE SPOKEN VOICE 21 June 2015

Some of you know that I have recently been on a Swann Hellenic Cruise - a cruise company once dubbed the 'Church of England at Sea'. One of my fellow speakers was not only a devout Roman Catholic, but something of a comedian. He told us a joke about the Holy Trinity planning their summer holidays. 'Let's go to Jerusalem,' says the Father. 'No, I have some unpleasant memories of Jerusalem,' says the Son, 'I'd rather not go there'. 'OK, well how about Rome?' says the Father. 'That would be nice,' says the Holy Spirit, 'I've never been there.'

Why do I tell you such an awful gag? Because it's common to think of theology as revealed and therefore written in stone. Something systematic and dogmatic as presented by great theologians like Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth. But I want to explore the idea that natural theology is close to the spoken voice; it grows from stories and preaching and gossip and singing and poetry in ways that are rarely systematic and more experiential.

It occurs to me that there so many ecclesiastical jokes – even anthologies of the Wit of the Church? Are we odd in this sense? The Muslims, for example, seem to detest jokes about their religion and want to do violence to anyone who makes a joke about it. But we like stories that are subversive of ecclesiastical norms or so-called theological 'truths'. Because while we see the importance of norms and standards, we recognise that what we consider to be norms are actually conditional, and that standards are imperfect and that when we take norms and standards and precepts over seriously they can grow into great hypocrisy bubbles needing to be pricked.

A very great number of the passengers were very elderly, well to do, and prim. On occasions I was put in mind of Miss Marple and Disgusted of Tonbridge Wells: the sort of people who might be offended by anything vulgar. But (although I can only speak for myself) I think there's something in most of us that delights in a little suggestive, unbuttoning humour.

Our comical lecturer told a story of his first child's birth, with some sentimentality. In the hospital his wife had difficulty breastfeeding and the boy was not getting enough sustenance. At the end of the bed was the usual clipboard of charts and notes. Gervase asked the nurse if he might take one of the sheets of paper as a keepsake. 'Why?' she asked. 'Because it's the first thing that has been written about my little boy's life – the beginning of his

biography – and I want to treasure it and give to him on his twenty first birthday. When the twenty first birthday came along, with great ceremony dad stood up to open the envelope containing this first piece of biography about his son. It read simply: poor sucker.

Some of you will remember that last term a friend of mine, Professor Phil Davis, gave a controversial sermon in which, amongst many other nuggets, he offered the thought that ‘To know the pain of not having a God is no logical proof of the necessity of that God’s existence.’ When I sent him his travelling expenses and a book token, he reciprocated immediately by sending me a book of essays, ‘The Death of Adam’, by Marilynne Robinson, an American writer who won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel ‘Gilead’.

In an essay about Bonhoeffer she writes: ‘Great theology is always a kind of giant and intricate poetry, like epic or saga. It is written for those who know the tale already, the urgent messages and the dying words, and who attend to its retelling with a special alertness, because the story has a claim on them and they on it. Theology is also close to the spoken voice. It evokes sermon, sacrament, and liturgy, and of course scripture itself, with all its echoes of song and legend and prayer.’

I would say we are doing theology not only when we intentionally set out to do it by reading, but when we meet on a street corner and talk about the death of a relation, or when we go to one of Penny Boxall’s writing classes and try our hand at writing, or when we joke about the foibles of the Church. We do theology in silence; and we do it in this culturally strange thing of hymn singing together, which is one of the triumphs of the church I think. Because there is something primal and bonding in both unison and harmonious singing. The words may be laden with doctrine – often rather crass doctrine – but it is not the words that are most important. As a matter of fact there are only a few hymns that would stand on their own without their tunes as poems to read out in church. It is the dynamic of communal, societal expression that is a religious thing.

In the same essay, Marilynne Robinson quotes Bonhoeffer’s remark that ‘God is the *beyond* in the midst of our lives’. That is, god is not only the transcendent other, God is the arresting, surprising, counter cultural, shock of meaning that occasionally jumps out at us in various unexpected ways providing a bridge to what we call the other.

I began with humour and its subversive quality of preventing us from taking ourselves too seriously. Well, a propos of nothing in particular, this week I re-read Alan Bennet's small book, 'The Uncommon Reader'. It's really an essay about the transformative value of books and reading, and the conceit he employs is to imagine what it would be like if our gracious Queen Elizabeth II were to become an avid reader and to be so absorbed by the books she reads that she wastes no opportunity to share these insights with her ministers and Privy Council and those who govern. They on the other hand, being largely philistine in the matter of literature, are completely nonplussed by this seemingly inappropriate and un-royal obsession. It's the sort of thing in the old days one would have been sent to the Tower for writing. Here's an extract in which Her Majesty and the Prime Minister discuss the forthcoming Christmas Broadcast. The Queen says:

'I thought this year one might do something different.'

'Different, ma'am?'

'Yes. If one were to be sitting on a sofa reading or, even more informally, be discovered by the camera curled up with a book...'

'And what would the book be, ma'am?'

'I was actually thinking of poetry.'

'Poetry, ma'am?' he smiled thinly.

'Thomas Hardy, for instance. I read an awfully good poem of his the other day about how the *Titanic* and the iceberg that was to sink her came together. It's called 'The Convergence of the Twain'. Do you know it?'

'I don't, ma'am. But how would it help...?'

'Oh surely,' said the Queen, 'it would show, wouldn't it, that fate is something to which we are all subject.'

And so on. The PM of course thought that the public must not be allowed to think that the world cannot be managed. That way lay chaos – or defeat at the polls...

The point I deduce from this, and I think Alan Bennett wished to make, is that public life would be enhanced if it were less bland and more open to the surprising insight into what is ultimately important. Reading can do this for you and so can the theology, particularly when it is close to the spoken voice,

because theology is concerned with what ultimately matters. Unfortunately, theology has a reputation for the opposite. For example, in parliamentary discourse, when an argument is thought to be esoteric or convoluted it is often described as *theological*.

What the Church might most usefully offer society are flashing insights into the *beyond* in the midst of our lives, in the way that a poet, or reader, or musician can sometimes do. And thus we might allow ourselves to become more unbuttoned, less process driven, less conformist to prevailing political method. In a word, more PROPHETIC.