

CONVERSATIONS WITH TEXTS IN WORSHIP

Hearing the Word of God has always been an important part of our worship within the mix of denominational traditions that have fed the spiritual hearts of people in rural churches, as in urban churches. During the Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Conference in Myrtleford Victoria in 1996 we heard about a service that took place during one of the hardest periods on the land in Australia. The drought was so bad and prices at the meat works so low that farmers were shooting their sheep. This was the work they were primarily engaged in through the week prior to worship, digging holes, shooting sheep and filling in the holes. The drought was hard enough to take but this requirement that they be death-dealers was extremely traumatic for people whose vocation is animal husbandry and caring for the land.

We heard that at church one Sunday during this time the reading was from John's Gospel, chapter ten – the Good Shepherd. The Bible text was read, the service continued and *not a word* was spoken about what the farmers were going through – “it slipped past, without comment”¹. As the epitome of irrelevance, this story has remained for me a reminder of what we must not do in our churches.

Recent Trans-Tasman Rural Ministry Conferences assure me that we have come a long way. Networking and the sharing of resources and ideas for sustaining church life have built up the confidence of rural churches. These things have also encouraged ministry that puts context and practical issues of life and livelihood second only to Christ in our focal awareness. Rural church leadership now predominantly involves ministry teams or clergy who have grown into ministry within a local rural church. They are practical people who instinctively seek to connect their faith to everyday life and to the current concerns of rural living.

We need to keep encouraging this and expand this understanding among people who join us at worship, namely, that faith relates to their concerns and they are not required to leave their troubles at the door when they enter a church. Seeing church as a refuge may tempt us to think this, and treat worship simply as a chance to be distracted for a time. Also we might think we should protect God from all the messy stuff and present ourselves as respectable and under control. But if this refuge is also going to be our strength it must be one where the pain and worries can come too, where it is safe to let them show a bit and where there is a feeling they are being shared and the load lightened as a result. If God is God, then God will cope with our messiness, our unrespectability and even our being out of control. That's all part of God's world, grist for the mill of God's compassion and justice.

We need also to encourage an understanding that attending church does not mean we leave our brains at the door. It is no quick and easy matter of matching pain and worries with scriptural words, as if band-aid Bible texts. To read about Jesus the Good Shepherd and then speak of the farmers' suffering, of reasons, causes and options, is hard work. It needs the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for sure, and a sharp mind to question and reason, to debate with the text and with the context and listen hard for God's word in the midst of the listening and talking.

The conversation I imagine engaging people in is between the biblical text and the people's context, and each person present conversing within themselves. They ask questions and listen for answers, and wrestle with the text in terms of their own needs and longings. It will be an active not a passive process, if we are to hear God's living, engaging word and not simply remain detached spectators at a worship event.

¹ *An Ecological Vision for the Rural Church*, ed. Julia Stuart, Uniting Church in Australia, 1996, p.46.

But our context is something so implicit in us that we take it as given and, like assumptions, do not usually spend time identifying it. We all know what's going on; we all know what life is like for us nowadays. But do we? Or rather, do we carry with us clarity of thought about what is of concern. Often it is more a dull ache of worry, or private pain that doesn't yet have words, or the sheer bewilderment of so much change and uncertainty surrounding us. In the rural context there are the times when these things sit together with the immediacy of a drought that still hasn't broken or a dollar that stays too high and costs that would escalate further if it dropped.

It makes sense therefore to foster skills and confidence to find our own words for our experiences. Dorothy McRae-McMahon's idea of a Symbol of God's Presence, which I use regularly during the early part of the worship service, helps do this by encouraging a substantial portion of the congregation – as many as take a turn at Bible reading and want to participate – to identify something in their life that they link with God being present with them. Significantly, the first step in identification is not words but an object: choosing *something* to bring along and place on the Table for the remainder of the service. Words follow as, almost without exception, people speak about what they have brought. They speak of their life, their experiences, passions, hopes, and they connect them with God. Our ordinary life is hallowed, as I experience it, listening to the stories that are told. Our context is clearly identified as a place where God is at work.

These people also choose the hymn or song that follows their symbol. This is not just a cunning plot to ease the taxing task of choosing hymns for worship, but adds another dimension to the person's reflections on faith and life. Music engages the right brain, and the hymns or songs we choose are usually holistic experiences of words and music together. In introducing their choice, those involved regularly insert another gem of insight into the weave of personal history and journey with Jesus.

This symbol is one suggestion for nurturing among us a greater consciousness of, and some competence in articulating, our life and context. It is groundwork that can make the particular task of engaging with biblical texts in the next stage of the service more natural, and more productive of results in terms of hearing God's word and getting clues for moving on.

The following suggestions for how this engagement can be assisted are an adaptation for worship of the Forum process I have used with rural community groups, which I urge us as rural churches to make use of. Text and context can engage in conversation with each other, that is, the Bible and the people of God gathered at worship can enter into dialogue with questions coming from each side, and answers too – ideas and possibilities, puzzles to keep puzzling about and challenges that trigger changes. I suggest the process starts with naming some of the concerns we currently have. With a small group they may help do this and interaction between leader and congregation will set the tone well for interaction in one's own thinking as one listens to scripture. Particular issues may be highlighted because the day's Bible readings have seemed to the leader to make salutary connections. What we are doing is placing some issues clearly in the centre of attention; then we can be ready hear the chosen Bible texts. For we are invited to listen to the text as if it were a 'window' through which we look at our context and discover new things.

Tradition says that what we read is the Bible as given (in translation, using whichever version is preferred). Paraphrases like Eugene Peterson's *The Message* are acceptable in some places and it may be possible to re-tell the story in more contemporary words or with a view to picking up a particular theme in it. But whether this is done as well as reading the original text or instead of it needs to be decided in sensitivity to the congregation's tradition and expectations.

A brief introduction to the text is valuable, in terms of its place within the Bible (which is in fact a book of books with a myriad of variety within it) or in relation to texts before it that may have been

read on previous weeks. The introduction can also place it in the likely cultural context of its origins in oral memory and as a written text. Immediately before the reader begins, the invitation is given to listen for what we hear that speaks to the concerns we have named, and others as well. It can be helpful to encourage people to let any questions or disturbances that stir in them as they listen also come to mind, not to push them away “so as not to upset God”, but to go for an honest and open conversation with this book that carries the stories of our faith.

What the preacher speaks following this reading of the text becomes a third offering for the conversation. Presented as the product of just one person’s reflection on how this text interacts with our context, the conversation can be kept open for those listening to participate. As one person has put it “reading the Bible ... is rather like pulling up a chair at a feast that has been under way for some time.”² There is always room for one more, as we say regarding the Communion Table. This needs to be operative also for the liturgy of the Word. A sermon need not be a monologue, even if other voices do not speak. In some situations there may be willingness to spend some of the sermon time, or another point in the service, in conversation as a whole group. But even when everyone else besides the preacher remains silent during the sermon, people need not be silent within their own thinking.

It all depends on how the leader’s words are spoken. If they instruct and dictate answers to the questions raised, if they propound a view that is imparted as definitive and conclusive of the issues – the one right way to see things – that is monologue. But if the words invite listeners to hear and consider, to form a faithful yet provisional understanding; if they model a process of searching and finding, and searching again, using questions as a way to explore further and being ready to change direction when new discoveries are made, then it is a form of dialogue.

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggeman quotes Jewish critic George Steiner who said: “It is the Hebraic intuition that God is capable of all speech acts except that of monologue, which has generated our acts of reply, of questioning, and counter-creation.”³ Therefore, says Brueggeman, “Dialogue ... is not merely a strategy, but it is a practice that is congruent with our deepest nature, made as we are in the image of a dialogic God.”⁴ Hearing the word of God is always a relational matter; knowing God is a matter of relationship, as Jesus tells us again and again.

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June 2008

² Mary Chilton Callaway, “Exegesis as Banquet: Reading Jeremiah with the Rabbis”, in *A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. Richard D. Weis and David M. Carr, p.220

³ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1989, p.225

⁴ Walter Brueggeman, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London: 2007, p.73