

Queens – October 2, 2017

‘What place is there in Methodism for a woman theologian?’ That was the question I put once to a senior Methodist statesman. ‘None’, he replied.

Now, nearly 60 years later, a house is to be named after a woman theologian. I’m deeply honoured that Methodism has chosen my name to affirm the fact that there is a place for us after all. I am but one among many women whose vocations are recognised by what is happening today.

But it’s not just about women – it’s about theology – about affirming the place of theology in the Methodist tradition. By today’s standards Wesley was a pretty slipshod scholar, but I’m sure the Methodist historian, Albert Outler, has been absolutely right to show how significant Wesley was as a theologian.

One sideline to my research has been following up Outler’s observations about Wesley’s respect for and knowledge of the early Fathers of the Church. Wesley wanted to read scripture in the way they read scripture, and was deeply influenced in his doctrine of Christian perfection by the Homilies of Macarius – so much so that I’ve been known to claim that he democratised the ancient monastic ideals found in those texts for the ordinary working-people of Britain...

Yet Methodism has such an activist streak it sometimes seems to devalue theology – and that’s easily internalised – why do I have a perennially guilty conscience about not doing any good in the world ...

But for all that Methodism does still have a distinguished line of theologians. Let me explain the context of my opening question. I was a Classics student at London University. I’d begun to wonder where my Classics was leading, and at home in the vacation had picked up my father’s Greek Testament and Kingsley Barrett’s *Commentary on John’s Gospel*. I had the first of my sudden unexpected epiphanies: I knew I had to use my Greek to go on and read Theology.

But where was it to lead? At Meth Soc I asked that elder statesman ... Despite the negative answer, I was compelled to find ways of pursuing that prompting. And I wasn’t the first – Morna Hooker was already on the same path ... Despite everything there is a line of Methodists who understand the value of theology – for in the end without it the vision which motivates the very life of the Methodist movement is in danger of eclipse.

So my hope for the house which bears my name is that a new generation of students will discover there a passion for the theological quest. For me the highlight of my relationship with Queens was when I had the privilege of teaching graduates in training for ordination at the University – there was Roger Walton, Will Morrey, Stephen Wigley, Bill Anderson, Ian Howarth, Helen Cameron – to name just a few. For most teachers their legacy lies in their students, and I'm proud of them. Most researchers hope their legacy lies in their publications. But today it seems as if my legacy is enshrined in bricks and mortar – very odd feeling!

But if it means that a new generation of students finds there their own intellectual engagement with questions about meaning and truth, then that's fine by me ... You see, the questions are so much more important than the answers. It's questions that open up the mind to new possibilities, new dimensions, new horizons, allowing the Spirit to lead us into all the truth, as we're promised by John's Gospel – into truth beyond our comprehension, into a proper humility of mind and heart before the mystery of Trinity, into a recognition of who we are and what our own meaning and truth is, as we let ourselves continually be shaped and re-shaped by the meaning and truth of scripture.

Let me share some of the most exciting weeks of my research career. It was back in the 80s, working with David Ford on *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*, the epistle in which Paul is struggling with conflict between himself and the community, and probably revealing more of himself than in any of other epistle, as he makes his *apologia*. I began to work through the psalms and prophets in the LXX/Greek version, and was astonished to find phrase after phrase which is echoed in the Greek text of that Corinthian epistle. Paul's language was profoundly scriptural, way beyond the actual quotes, and a particularly powerful influence was Jeremiah - hence the readings in this service.

Jeremiah at his call-vision protests that he doesn't know how to speak and the Lord touched his mouth, saying he's put words into his mouth, and he's appointed over nations and kingdoms to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.

Paul in 2 Corinthians claims authority to build up and tear down, and defends himself from criticism for his weak presence and naïve speech ..

And all Paul's references to boasting – the key text for understanding Paul's self-defence in this epistle is 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord' (2 Cor. 10.17) – straight from Jeremiah 9.23ff and quoted already in 1 Corinthians 1.31. Then there's Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant, and that new covenant lies at the heart of Paul's arguments, especially in 2 Cor. 3. And there's Jeremiah's struggle with false-prophets and Paul's with the pseudo-apostles.

But the way in which Paul found his own meaning and truth through Jeremiah is perhaps most clear in Galatians 1.15: 'God set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace', writes Paul, echoing Jeremiah 1.5, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you'. And Jeremiah was told, 'I appointed you a prophet to the nations', while Paul's call was 'so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' - in Greek the same word *ethne* = nations and Gentiles, depending on context.

All that is just a taster – there was the material I found in Ezekiel and Isaiah, but it was perhaps the discovery of Paul's formation through the psalms which got me more and more hooked... Paul had lived in his Bible to the point where certain features of scripture came to mould not only his self-understanding but also his understanding of what was going on in the conflict between him and the church – in fact the scriptural resonances led me to propose that it was that very conflict which was his 'thorn in the flesh' not some supposed health problem ... but let's leave all that there ...

For what a contrast with the kind of biblical studies I was trained in back in the 60s; straight historical reading, objectivity, the original meaning was *the* meaning, etc. Well, of course, that was how I was reading Paul, finding out more about Paul's original meaning through research,

but it was not how Paul himself was reading Jeremiah and the psalms. He was reading for himself and his contemporaries – distilling from scripture patterns of meaning and truth with which they could identify – and that's without even beginning to explore how for Paul the old scriptures, re-read in the light of Christ, made sense of all that had happened, and of the Gospel he had to proclaim.

Reading ourselves into scripture – this was not the only research topic which took me into that whole issue. Of course the post-modern challenge to historical criticism also had some impact, but for me the arguments about typology were another catalyst – though by comparison with that insight into Paul it was a slow burn, indeed my publications reveal how I changed my mind about the subject more than once over the long period in which I engaged with early Christian interpretation of scripture.

You might think this was a strange area for a Methodist theologian – but not only did it make use of my classical training, but as hinted earlier, it was important for John Wesley to read scripture as the early theologians did ... and historical theology, I suggest, is a significant exercise in ecumenism over time ...

So typology – I won't attempt to define it here – there's a real danger that I'm on the way to turning a sermon into a lecture – let me just suggest that it was not only about discovering prophetic fulfilments and repeated patterns in scripture's story-telling – seeing parallels between Hannah and Mary, between the widow's son raised by Elijah and the widow's son raised at Nain by Jesus, between the manna in the Sinai desert and the multiplied loaves in the wilderness ...

one could go on ... But typology was not just that kind of thing: there was also seeing Job as the 'type' of patience, of encouraging people in preaching to emulate the virtues of biblical heroes, of describing contemporary bishops and saints, even women, in terms of biblical figures who were 'types' of particular characteristics ... in other words it was a way of reading themselves and their contemporaries into scripture.

So why shouldn't we too read ourselves into scripture? Discover our own meaning and truth through letting ourselves be shaped by scripture, letting our own experience give us insight into scripture? Hmm ... Was it an accident that it was around that time when we were engaged with 2 Corinthians that I had my second unexpected epiphany – sometimes referred to (a bit tongue-in-cheek) as my 'Damascus Road' experience?

Now all this is not about making scripture mean anything we like – eisegesis not exegesis – but about taking scripture's models and patterns seriously so as to read ourselves into the text, allowing scripture to shape a hermeneutic of ordinary life – so that we can make startling claims: I once began a broadcast sermon with the words, 'I met God in the Raddlebarn Road'.

Testimony was once one of the hallmarks of Methodism. As some will know, giving testimony has been one of the ways in which my theological work (some of it anyway) has differed from that of most academics. So let me end with testimony.

I got started on theology through Barrett's *Commentary on John*, but Jesus walked into my home through Jean Vanier's reflective commentary, entitled *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*.

Vanier likens the Gospel of John to a mine of precious stones, from which he has extracted a few; one precious stone is found in his treatment of chapter 11. 'This is the first time in the Gospel of John that we hear of Jesus' love for individual people,' notes Vanier. Cross-referencing Luke's Gospel, he observes that the family's home in Bethany is called the 'home of Martha', not the home of Lazarus. In Luke Lazarus is not present, while in John's Gospel 'Lazarus is present but never speaks and is never described'.

Lazarus seems to be a "nobody",

except to his sisters and Jesus, who love him deeply.

He seems to be at the centre of the family,

living with his two unmarried sisters.

As I read all this I cannot help but come to the conclusion,

which of course comes from my experience in l'Arche
with people with disabilities,
that Lazarus has a handicap and probably a serious one.

The word *asthenés* can imply this.

Were the two sisters unmarried in order to look after him?

The words of his sister, "the one you love is sick,"

Seem to me significant.

To me, these words imply

"the one that you visit and bathe,

the one you love with tenderness and affection,

is in danger of death."

This is of course only a supposition ...

Vanier later notes how Jesus acts to give Lazarus life at the cost of his own; this 'nobody' becomes somebody with a very special significance.

Arthur, born with profound learning disabilities and needing total care, is my Lazarus. Inspired by Jean Vanier I wrote this little poem:

Jesus

He walked into my home;

his eyes pierced

my Martha soul.

He sat and conversed by the fire;

his words scorched

my Mary heart.

He bent over the bed;
his touch raised
my Lazarus smile.

The broken one he loved
beyond us all.

And here is a realisation of that Bethany Visitation, by a Bulgarian artist trained in iconography. Somehow, as I read myself into scripture, Jesus makes whole my fractured self, the anxious Martha is redeemed, the precocious Mary is humbled, the wounded Lazarus is touched ...

So to mark my legacy in bricks and mortar, may I present this to be hung in the house – better far than some portrait of yours truly – for this points to Jesus –

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to your name be the glory.

Prayer of St Benedict.