Changing Perceptions: literature and church

David Dickinson – Minister at Trinity Church, Sutton

What changes does the literature of our time challenge the Church to make? Two indicators of social and political change in the early years of the 21st century are, first, that people absent themselves from church and, second, that they look elsewhere, including the arts, to explore their spirituality. As a result, literature, especially in novel form, has a persisting interest in religion, spirituality and theology. In his session Dave Dickinson began a consideration of how three novel genres encourage the church to change in terms of practice and belief. Following is a selection of the sources he used in his workshop.

Church going by Philip Larkin (short quote)

> A serious house on serious earth it is,
> In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
> Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
> And that much never can be obsolete,
> Since someone will forever be surprising
> 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 round.

You can hear Philip Larkin read the entire poem aloud here.

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"We are in a society that thinks entirely about faith because of our sense of encroachment by Islam, and our defiance against that because we have our own way of being, which is of course based on Christianity. But no one is Christian. So we're trying to defend an ideal which we can't really define ourselves, which we almost entirely don't believe in. And we're coming up against something which is quite overwhelming and encroaching and dictatorial – some aspects of Islam – and yet at another level, there's something beautiful and glorious about it. And so I feel as if

this conflict is entirely about faith, and yet the one thing no one wants to talk about is faith."

Nicola Barker in Guardian newspaper interview 22nd July 2017

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The door at the back of the church slammed shut. David waited for the music to stop. There were three, perhaps four hundred people staring at him. He attempted to unleash his famous grin, but felt his skin tightening as he smiled. … *Pull yourself together,* he said to himself, then suddenly worried that he had spoken the words out loud. He smiled again, and the smile came more easily this time. He twinkled his eyes. The music faded. A beat of silence.

'Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. A particular welcome to our friends visiting from across the Atlantic: he began, his voice remarkably steady. 'I started the Course because I kept hearing the same thing from the young people I spoke to. And it was very different from the message that I was hearing from the press, the message I got from my own church. This wasn't a Godless generation. These young people weren't drugged up and lacking in morals and beyond saving. They just didn't feel that the church, or rather the experience of church that they had through school or through their parents, spoke to them at all. So I decided to do something about it.'

It began to rain outside. Shadows passed across the stained-glass windows. He took a sip of water. It was going well.

'We have three hundred churches in the UK running the Course, a further sixty in Australia and New Zealand. And - and this is our great success this year - we have just signed up the two hundredth church in the United States. So over five hundred churches have decided that change is necessary, that we must find a new way of doing things, that our faith will die if we don't breathe life into it.' He was sweating a little.

'That life comes from the energy, the optimism of the young people in our church.'

David heard, very faintly, the sound of Lee playing the piano. Panic hit him like the smack of a wave. He looked around the hall wildly, then back to the empty lectern. He could feel his heart beating hard in his chest.

'I feel so blessed to have had the opportunity to work with our young people, with the Course leaders …' David paused, looked out into the audience. The Earl was tugging at his ear lobe. He tried to remember if they had discussed a secret signal of some sort.

'We have enough old men in the church. It's time to give youth a chance. I think sometimes we forget how young Jesus himself was. These young people …'

David remembered how Lee's fingers used to look when she played. He recalled placing his hands over hers, feeling the delicate bones moving, nursing the notes from the piano. Her head nodding as she swayed with the music. He remembered that, just before she had died, she had cut her hair. Then he saw her skin peeling from her scalp in his nightmare.

' … It's amazing to see the devotion in the eyes of these young people, before they have been ruined by the world …'

David's breaths came fast and shallow. His heart seemed to be skipping beats, dancing across his chest in jags and stutters.

'… While they still have hope …' Suddenly, terribly distinctly, he pictured the moment when the hairless skull in his nightmare turned towards him. Hollow sockets where Lee's eyes should have been, pinkish flesh clinging to bone in the corners.

'It's … Working with these young people is so …'

His mind was blank. He could see his irregular pulse in the corners of his eyes. He looked down at the Earl, whose face had turned very red. He saw one of the Americans glance at his watch. He leaned forward onto the lectern, which began to wobble. His water glass fell to the floor, spilling its contents onto the wooden stage and then rolling off to land at the Earl's feet.

'Thank you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry … thanks very much,' he said, lifting his hand and waving half-heartedly to the audience. He walked from the stage. A few people clapped. Silence followed by the scarping of chairs, muttered conversation.

from 'The Revelations' Alex Preston (2012)

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"Now, bless thyself: thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born." (Shakespeare: The Winter's Tale)

The first of three epigraphs to Michael Arditti's 'Easter' (2000)

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Ralph went back to the Red House to collect his belongings. He would stay with Emma, he supposed. Anna said she did not want the house, but of course when she had thought about it she would want it, and it would be his responsibility to support her and the children. When he thought of the possible consequences of their separation - of rent for him and rates for her, of the severing of bank accounts and the relative poverty in which they would both live - his mind sheered off and went in some other direction, towards the contemplation of his moral insufficiency. That was easier for him; he was used to abstractions. Perhaps most people are, he thought. We indulge in guilt, shame - but faced with the practical effects of these emotions, we call in a solicitor. No wonder lawyers are never out of work.

He went up to their bedroom and packed some clothes. Anna had said she did not want sordid to-ing and fro-ing - that was the expression she had used - but of course it is impossible to crush a life into two suitcases. He tried, and then gave up, and sat on the edge of their bed, his face in his hands.

He hoped Anna would come in. She would not, of course. What would she see? Nothing to lift her spirits. You wreck your family once ... years pass ... you wreck it twice. He had evolved very nicely, he thought: along the only possible route.

Perhaps I should leave my clothes, and take my papers, I will need to clear out my desk ... He was conscious of Anna, moving elsewhere in the house. Wherever he was, she wasn't; they skirted and avoided each other.

In his office, he sat down in his wooden swivel chair. He looked at his photograph, the picture taken on the step at Flower Street. He folded the frame, laid it face down. That would be the last thing Anna would want; he should never have taken it out, it had only made the children ask questions. Sightless, his mother and father stared down at him: sepia eyes. How his father's face had coarsened, with age; the flesh swelling, the features seeming to shrink. Would he be like that? It was possible, of course, that when the picture was taken his father was no older than he was now. And

surely, he thought, I'm going his way: two inches on the waist, the reading glasses, those shirts that arc too small around the collar, and get put to the back of the wardrobe. I am in no shape for a new life, he thought. But, anyway. It seems I have to have one.

Will Anna just watch me go, he wondered. Or is she waiting for me to make some gesture, some sign - but how would I know what it was? She had said she meant him to go, and he must allow her to mean what she said, he must allow her that.

Everything's gone, he thought: just pride remains. But how terrible, perhaps the worst thing in the world: to be taken at your word.

His hand crept into the first drawer of his desk. Closed around stone: Gryphaea. He held it to his cheek, and then against his mouth. A child's life; the salt and cold. He tasted it: Phylum: Mollusca. Class: Pelecypoda. Order: Pterioda. Such confidence, he'd felt as a child, about the order of the world. Family: Gryphaeidae. Genus: *Gryphaea.* Species: *arcuata.* The past doesn't change, of course: it lies behind you, petrified, immutable. What changes it is the way you see it. Perception is everything. It turns villains into heroes and victims into collaborators. He held the object up between his fingers: took a sighting, and spun it across the room into the wastepaper basket.

from 'A Change of Climate' Hilary Mantel (1994)

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Prize-Giving by Gwen Harwood (1920-1995)

Professor Eisenbart, asked to attend
a girls' school speech night as an honoured guest
and give the prizes out, rudely declined;
but from indifference agreed, when pressed
with dry scholastic jokes, to change his mind,
to grace their humble platform, and to lend

distinction (of a kind not specified)
to the occasion. Academic dress
became him, as he knew. When he appeared
the girls whirred with an insect nervousness,
the Head in humbler black flapped round and steered
her guest, superb in silk and fur, with pride

to the best seat beneath half-hearted blooms
tortured to form the school's elaborate crest.
Eisenbart scowled with violent distaste,
then re composed his features to their best
advantage: deep in thought, with one hand placed
like Rodin's Thinker. So he watched the room's

mosaic of young heads. Blonde, black, mouse-brown
they bent for their Headmistress' opening prayer.
But underneath a light (no accident
of seating, he felt sure), with titian hair
one girl sat grinning at him, her hand bent
under her chin in mockery of his own.

Speeches were made and prizes given. He shook
indifferently a host of virgin hands.
"Music!" The girl with titian hair stood up,
hitched at a stocking, winked at near-by friends,
and stood before him to receive a cup
of silver chased with curious harps. He took

her hand, and felt its voltage fling his hold
from his calm age and power; suffered her strange
eyes, against reason dark, to take his stare
with her to the piano, there to swap
her casual schoolgirl's for a master's air.
He forged his rose-hot dream as Mozart told

the fullness of all passion or despair
summoned by arrogant hands. The music ended,
Eisenbart teased his gown while others clapped,
and peered into a trophy which suspended
his image upside down: a sage fool trapped
by music in a copper net of hair.

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Dave Dickinson taught secondary school English in Newcastle upon Tyne before training for the Methodist ministry. He has researched and written in the field of theology and literature since the early 1990s. Author of *The Novel as Church: Preaching to Readers in Contemporary Fiction* (Baylor University Press, 2013) and of *Yet Alive? Methodists in British Fiction since 1890* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016), he was Director of the St Albans Centre for Christian Studies from 2005 to 2013 and now serves as minister of Trinity Church Sutton in Surrey (www.trinitychurchsutton.org.uk).