

## **Metanoia precedes management: reflections on theological learning, radical passivity and the urge to organise**

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In this discussion paper, I suggest that any intentional processes of transformation which resonate with the Christian witness to a messianic in-breaking of God must be structured around the expectation of creatively disruptive learning experiences. The work of theological educators is not primarily about church management but about supporting the continuous learning of communities of practice such that they are familiar enough with how other Christian communities have interpreted and inhabited Gospel traditions in particular circumstances. It is enough that we learn together to recognise, trust, allow and respond attentively to the disorienting advent of God, that we can be honest about our own resistances and mixed motives, and that we drop misguided preoccupation with outcomes.

### **Beginning with resurrection**

The Gospels, each in their own way, testify to transformative encounters between the risen Christ and those who had been his followers, friends, apprentices. According to this testimony, even their full-bodied and whole-hearted apprenticeship of Christ in his earthly life had not prepared them to remain faithful at the point of crisis. According to the scriptures, the full-time disciples had neither adequately understood that 'the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again,' (Mk 8:31) nor had they the courage to remain in solidarity with Jesus and with one another under pressure. They were precisely *not* Christ-like during that intensive episode when their dreams of a successful campaign fell apart before the overwhelming violence of an occupying imperial force aligned with a threatened and compromised religious establishment. This is what the post-resurrection witness narrates about pre-resurrection understanding.

The indigestible information - about suffering and glory to come - follows a pivotal question at the heart of Mark's Gospel: 'Who do people say that I am?' The disciples report analogies, resonances with what was already familiar: 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets' (Mk 8:28). People were recognising connections, but not quite finding ways to integrate the new and the old. They knew their traditions,

and at least one of its contemporary embodiments. None was reported as making the connection Peter made: 'You are the Messiah.' Then Peter also reveals how he is struggling with the dialectical tension between old and new understandings, unable to grasp the implications of what his mind is telling him.

Into the failure, grief and fear to which the passion narratives bear witness, the risen Christ irrupted, inspiring those apprentices to embark on a full-bodied apostolate, to recall and re-frame their memories of Jesus through a new knowledge, an 'intelligence of the Victim' (Alison, 1993, ch.2). In other words, their witness, the source of our faith, includes a narrative which tells of how even these devoted, intentional learners (apprentices, students, confrères) did not – indeed *could* not – deeply know Jesus before some at least had experienced irruptive encounters with the risen Christ. Prior to that, their learning seems to have been missing a key ingredient. They were inadequately prepared to digest Jesus' teaching and to allow its spirited implications to animate their own witness (which is μαρτυρέω, martyrdom). Their fuller knowing began to come together after experiencing the disruptive and disorienting, restorative and reorienting presence of the risen and crucified Christ. Then around their compelling witness grew networks of communication and new communion, responsive action and new patterns of organisation, energised hope and experiments in (not least) inclusive mutuality.

### **Disruptive learning**

Between their knowing Jesus before the crucifixion and resurrection, and their knowing Jesus after, the disciples in the Gospels experience both continuities and rifts. Between their knowing their world before the crucifixion and resurrection, and their knowing of the world after, the disciples experience both continuities and rifts. There are similar continuities and rifts for present-day disciples in our experiences of getting to know Jesus and our worlds in relation to those 'before and after' narratives. We speak of these experiences in terms of the working of the Holy Spirit. When studies of the scriptures, and their development in other texts and other lives, occasionally catch light for present-day disciples - in incandescent events we might describe as epiphany or assurance or conviction - then is this an equivalent resurrection moment? Our discerning answers, our interpreting of meanings and implications, depends on the

extent to which our faith praxis is informed by attentive and well-directed studies in Christian traditions.

If particular moments or episodes are deemed significant in the formation of disciples who bear witness, then a practical question concerns the conditions under which these formative events are more likely to occur for particular disciples or communities of disciples. Thinking about our work in a seminary, for example, one person or group of people may undergo such experiences in an intensive classroom situation; others in contemplative solitude. For some it may happen on placement amidst disenfranchised or impoverished people; or perhaps through yielding to a close reading of a classic text. There may be students who emerge from painful and disorienting trauma into newly-formed understanding, whilst some may experience Christ as the consistently hospitable, reliable, supportive network of friends who constitute the local congregation. Each instance is determined by the way in which the learners' previous experience has shaped interpretative reception, whilst each outcome depends on the quality and nature of relationships, on communication and communion with other disciples, on love and resilience, and on specific opportunities to perform and embed the implications of any change in heart and mind.

What I take to be a constant, in continuity with the Gospel texts mentioned, is that Christian discipleship or 'conformity to Christ' involves a preparedness and capacity to give oneself over to the possibility of disruption – disruption of our current understanding of the world, of God in Christ, of ourselves in relation to others, of how to read the Bible and received interpretations, of our particular vocations and so on. So, I want to re-focus attention on pivotal Biblical traditions which, at least potentially, prepare hearers and readers for some degree of regular disorientation and reorientation, dismantling and restructuring.

### **The cost of conviction**

It is one thing to study and contemplate such texts and their interpretation in other classic or contemporary texts. We can learn habits of reading together and we can learn to discuss with humility, rigour and hospitality. It is a further step to yield to the effect of the founding testimony, to own that discipleship carries the inherent probability that we, like the companions of Jesus-in-the-flesh, have not yet adequately grasped the meaning or the implications of aligning with the one we call Christ.

It is not altogether apparent how we should embody or bear witness to these narratives of disruptive, in-breaking grace and revelation, or how as theological educators we should establish conditions where creatively disruptive learning might be held. Precisely how we associate these narratives of disruption with present-day experiences and expectations, with structures of church or academy or society, depends in part on the hermeneutic habits we have already learned. Those habits may be deeply embedded, unrecognised, even beyond articulation until laid open to circumstances which reveal to us patterns of thought and behaviour formed around self-protection, self-deception and self-aggrandisement.

Which is one way of reading what the Gospels tell us about how apprenticeship became witness to the risen Christ. Structures of meaning and habits of behaviour are broken open and reconstituted time and again for players in biblical texts and in stories of the lives of saints. A more adequate, full-bodied knowing seems to involve repeatedly disruptive encounter, and assimilation of new perspectives and convictions. Or, at least, a willingness to bear the possibility of irruption into our previous ways of knowing, an irruption which modifies, even overturns, former understandings of the web of relationships and the circumstances in which the learner is located.

### **Location and position**

One consequence of disruptive learning may therefore be a heightened awareness of a need to shift location, to inhabit a different place in the complex web of human relationships. That shift in location may be prompted by a dawning revelation that our familiar places deprive us of perspectives available to the blessed (Matt. 5: 3-11 and 25: 34-45), and of a learned behaviour with soteriological consequences. In other words, I know I need to be moved, literally, in order to be receptive to the kind of continued learning implicit in knowing Jesus.

Ongoing conversations about how ordained representative ministries are trained and formed frequently focus on whether and to where (amongst whom) we might be moved, which is also about what we are exposed to. If these conversations are to be fruitful, they require preliminary ground-clearing which involves candid honesty about the economic and controlling interests of all parties, and about the investment of each participant in either the maintenance or the disruption of established patterns in educational and church structures. Similar preliminaries would be expected

of the dominant voices in discussion about church growth, decline or change.

In my own case, for example, as a theological educator and an ordained minister, I have a family who rightly expect my reliable contribution to their living with stability, safety and reasonable opportunity. A university lecturer, on the other hand, is pressed to keep publishing in order to maintain a profile or gain promotion. Student ministers may be keener than they admit to gain academic award for reasons of self-esteem, or to satisfy that sense of having missed an opportunity when they were younger. Or, alternatively, they may avoid an academic context seen as threatening to the conventional thinking of people from whom they do not want to be estranged. Others may be overly invested in the immediate satisfactions of particular forms of pastoral ministry, not entirely clear why they so need to be needed. A church officer may resist speaking from the heart, if the heart conflicts with expressed views of people who may be able to influence future position or reputation. And so on. Where these realities are masked, a fracture opens between what is actual and what the discussion appears to be about, which in turn can lead to diminished trust and extremely tedious or frustratingly insubstantial discussion.

The everyday realities of human society and the human heart are taken into account in any sensible conversation about how human communities interact and change (and we are always interacting and changing). Then our work involves doing our best to differentiate between distinctively *Christian* aspects of continuous formation, and the several other interests which bear upon the discussions – economic factors, questions of control and power, mid-life anxieties, recruitment for maintenance of established institutions, and so on. These latter factors, along with disproportionate preoccupation with outcomes, measurable results and restructuring, sometimes overshadow the primary questions, which can in fact put those other questions into proper perspective.

So, let us at least *begin* with consideration of what it means to be willing to be receptive together to the in-breaking Christ, to a Pentecostal Spirit. How then do we recognise when that is happening, according to the witness passed on to us?

### **Learning and knowledge are corporate gift not for personal benefit**

Formation in discipleship involves discernment of the will of God. Whether our spirituality prioritises either the imitation of Christ or the adoration of

Christ, discernment implies a renewal of the mind which (according to Paul) comes with a sacrificial and full-bodied self-offering (Rom. 12:1-2). It involves humility and clear judgement (Rom 12:3). Forms of vocation and everyday ministry will differ, but the tasks are connected in grateful awareness that disciples belong to one another; that our witness is only ever corporate (Rom 12:4-8). The risen Christ brings a heart-felt knowledge that we are members one of another, where the other is *every* other, including those who have gone before us, those who will follow, those we will never know individually but whose knowing of Christ is part of the learning which sustains witness to the presence of Christ in each present locality. We are each a part, a local expression, of a knowing and a witnessing which is only ever corporate.

If this is the case, several implications follow. First of all, we are committed to learning on behalf of one another, and therefore to communicating generously and effectively. A learning culture modelled on an economy which sets one against another, which discourages our being vulnerable (say, to the fear of appearing ignorant or inadequate), which inculcates the notion that knowledge is acquired by or passed on to individuals for personal benefit ('I invested in this and expect to gain from the investment') is ill-fitting to the task of the formation of witnesses to Christ. The commodification of a theological educational package in a consumer-oriented culture can work against its potentially transformative content and the kind of corporate learning I have been trying to describe.

The theological academy at best sustains and nurtures rigorous and skilled corporate engagement with theological literature, but it is in disciplined and committed communities of practice that followers are able to discover how best to put their learning at the service of others, to become (in other words) mediators of habits of serious theological engagement amongst specific local communities or congregations. Where this is effectively achieved, we see a welcome blurring of the distinction between those with formal access to academic theological education and those without.

A second implication, then, is that there is more to be gained by focusing on the quality of communication and the nurturing of communion (or good society), than by focusing on structures of organisation and management. Language of organisational management seems to have become more fluid, where calls for change in ecclesial contexts still seem to imply that human organisations can be static; however, the impulse to control and

contain even fluid movement can override a willingness to accept, even to acknowledge, the unknowable and uncontrollable outcomes of a complex system, such as a human community or human heart. To acknowledge the unknowable and unpredictable aspects of church evolution, and their connection with incidences of unplanned disruption recognised as epiphanic, is no excuse for incompetence, laziness or abdication of responsibility. Of course, hungry people need a meal delivered; an event needs to be planned and managed; somebody has to balance the accounts, and so on. My theme is different, and leads to such questions as where, for example, disciples are most likely to encounter and be held in sustained, effective communication with other disciples whose perspectives, life experiences and reception of Christian witness contrast markedly with their own. Where are disciples most likely to be held in sustained, effective interaction with the recorded witness of disciples who preceded us, who in turn grappled with the testimony of the first generation of witnesses? Where and how are disciples most likely to be required to work out the implications of Jesus' words and actions for their life together?

### **Concluding comments**

These brief reflections emerge out of experiences of the untidy and often unplanned business of deep learning, and of resistance to learning. Over time I have become increasingly convinced that attentive and hospitable reading, for example, is itself a transformative practice consistently undervalued across the church (which may be amplified not only by invasive electronic media practices but also by a peculiarly British form of pragmatism and anti-intellectualism). I am also increasingly convinced that classical monasticism has a great deal to teach us about immersive, corporate reading which requires no secondary award or motivation: as Thomas Merton said, "one graduates by rising from the dead" (Merton, 2013, p.435). At the same time, I remain convinced of the creatively formational impact of a significant shift in context - of being moved, in other words - to where our vulnerability is increased because we are less able to cling to the securities of learned competencies and roles. Outcomes cannot easily be predicted, nor should they be controlled. I have led intensive residential learning courses which some students described as radically transformative whilst others in the same classes described them as bewildering. I have taken groups of people for immersive learning experiences overseas where one has returned with a vividly refocused sense of vocation, and another became so anxious that she lost

perspective on any sense of vocation whatsoever. A student taking up residence for training in an unfamiliar neighbourhood resented and feared what felt like an alienating experience, until a chance encounter led to a profound shift in perspective and an enduring love for the people and places which had initially seemed threatening. In our consideration of processes and patterns of formation, attention to the complexity and particularity of the narratives of learners seems essential. As does early reflection on the resurrection narratives, not least those in which Jesus seems to acknowledge fear and invite a deeper trust: 'Peace be with you...' (John 20: 21 and 26).

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## **Bibliography**

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