

Newsletter August 2010

Real life theology (theology for the 21st Century)

From the Director and Canon Theologian



There's a false belief out there that theology is some strange esoteric subject far removed from the practicalities of daily life. All those alleged mediaeval debates about the number of angels that could dance on the head of a pin might have something to do with it, but I also suspect unwillingness amongst many to live as if God really is part of ordinary life. We are very good at corralling God: to worship on Sundays, to discussion about scripture, to debates about some (but not all) aspects of ethics and morality. However, most people live through most of their days without reflecting theologically very much at all. Do they think God is not interested in our daily existence? Or are they content to move from one emotion to another, preferring to 'feel' about rather than think about God?

I am passionate about the importance of bringing theology into the every day. I think nostalgically of the 4th Century, when someone just like us would go out to do the shopping and get into a theological argument with the local baker. Gregory of Nyssa complained, "If you ask for the price of bread, you're told the Father is greater and the Son inferior. If you ask, is the bath ready, someone answers, the Son was created from nothing." Some of this, I suspect, was the pleasure of an argument, in the way that we debate the respective merits of the Hurricanes and the Chiefs, or who is going to win the World Cup. But some of it was that back then, people were trying to work out just how Jesus was related to the Father, and was Jesus really God – because for them it really mattered.

This WIT Newsletter presents some theologising about things that matter to us today. The 2nd part of 'Mystery or Miracle: the search for healing in a suffering world' engages with the reality of life as we actually live it – alongside suffering (both personal and environmental), threats from crime or the global financial crisis: life that can be filled with hope, despair, and the search for meaning in the face of unpredictability.

The conference on 'Public Christianity: is there any other Kind?' also concerns itself with real life theology. Through speakers and workshops it will engage participants in key issues around how we can actually grow the gospel at the grassroots in the communities in which we live. In recognising that Christianity is public truth, not merely a personal, private matter, it will challenge us to link our theologising to our daily lives. Finally, my reflection on 'gift and grace' takes the well-known Pauline concept of grace away from its status as a key item of church jargon and into the world of giving presents.

Theology is too important – and too much fun – to be left to the 'experts'. So get out there and grapple with all the issues we find when we watch the TV news, have dinner with friends or take the kids down to the park - and do it knowing that God is not an absent professor or a mere spectator but an interested participant in this world. Let's engage with some real life theology!

Canon Deborah Broome

Scripture, Art and Colin McCahon - Expanding the Theological Imagination

A presentation by Dr Kath Rushton, RSM
with time for discussion



Monday 16 August, 5pm-6.45pm
Loaves & Fishes Hall, Hill St,
Wellington Cathedral of St Paul
Drinks & nibbles provided

RSVP to Jenny Wilkens by Sunday 15th August
canon@wellingtoncathedral.org.nz
or ph 04 472-0286

WELLINGTON INSTITUTE OF
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Anglican Diocese of Wellington

Mystery or miracle: the search for healing in a suffering world (Part 2)

We know from the Gospel accounts that God does not remove himself from the suffering within his world but enters deeply into it through the cross. Our prayers for release from suffering will always therefore be more than the placebo that is sometimes claimed, allowing the grace of God to flow into our lives and the lives of those for whom we pray. For some there will indeed be the miracle, and hope rightly lies at the heart of the Christian faith. We cannot ignore the Gospel mandate to walk in the footsteps of Christ following the ministry that he has called us to but we should perhaps exercise caution in focusing on the miracle at the expense of the mystery on which our lives may be only a faint tracing.¹ If we haven't yet grasped a unified theory of physics, it may well be an unrealistic expectation that we will ever fully understand how God relates to the cosmos², but ultimately this may provide more comfort than dismay if we have the humility within an increasing egocentric society to acknowledge our limitations.

In this respect there is the potential for hope as, in Dillard's words, 'it could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem'.³ While we may feel at times as if we are stumbling in the dark it is perhaps worth dwelling on the significance of the words of American poet Richard Wilbur: "All that we do is touched with ocean yet we remain on the shore of what we know."⁴ There is a challenge here to break the potential constraints of what we may claim to 'know' and plunge into the ocean depths of our faith which are as yet unexplored. According to Ellul, it is only when we launch into the deep that we will truly see,⁵ a challenge facing every generation of believers and particularly those involved in the fields of science and the arts.

Our theology, while attempting to address the issues of suffering and meaningless waste and death, must maintain honesty about the reality of life as we experience it or we may be left with only anger, bitterness and despair. It is worth reflecting on the fact that, as Hyers points out, in creating worlds of our own through story or game we tend to recreate the world that we live in with greater amounts of chance, challenge and hazard requiring greater amounts of effort, training, intensity and gamble than ordinary life. All the things which do not seem to 'belong in a world created by a wise and benevolent God are the very things that we, with all the wisdom power and good intentions at our disposal, demand of the game worlds we create'.⁶ A rugby ball is shaped to add unpredictability to a game that would have no meaning if the outcome was predetermined. Ironically it may be that we only discover the full extent of our creativity and potential, as well as the possible depths of our compassion, in situations of great stress and we may therefore need to acknowledge that God in His infinite wisdom, has created a world that is designed with this in mind.

The many aspects of the world that we find unpalatable have led to extraordinary achievements in the arts, sciences and technology and we are still discovering the potential of being made in the image of God. Equally important is that they are also perhaps the only way that we will ever achieve the compassion, self-sacrifice and genuine love and concern for others that the Christian faith demands. The opening years of the 21st century have already, in many ways, revealed society at its worst in the self-focused indulgence that has led to the excesses that are destroying not only the environment but also the people within. The rise in addictions fuelled by alcohol, drugs or promiscuous sexual activity, the global financial crisis and the increase in violent crime are challenges that will have

(Continued overleaf)

WIT seminars on Genesis

Saturday 16 October St Peter's Church, Palmerston North

Saturday 30 October WIT Library, Anglican Centre, Wellington

Saturday 6 November St Luke's Church, Greytown

Seminars will run 10:00 am – 3:00 pm. BYO lunch.



Mystery or miracle: the search for healing in a suffering world (continued)

to be faced in the immediate future. A post-flood theology tells us that God will not intervene with devastating judgement, and it may well be that he will not intervene in spectacular rescue or prevention methods either. We inhabit a post-flood world that we are actually responsible⁷ and accountable for to both present and future generations; a side of being made in God's image that we often choose to ignore but do so at our peril.

How then do we offer comfort to those who are hurting through no fault of their own? How do we avoid the sometimes false hope of desperation and the consequent despair, when miracles do not occur, of feeling abandoned to the cold comfort of the mystery within a theology that seems disconnected from the harsh realities of life? Reassuringly, the biblical texts address both questions revealing that the world of the ancient Near East was as problematic for its inhabitants as it remains for us today. The challenge for our 21st century theology lies, therefore, in reclaiming their message and interpreting it into our time so that its relevance is not lost. In doing so we may then delve further into the mystery and discover the miracle of the true hope to be found in God's continuing grace revealed in the Spirit-borne gifts of loving compassion and commitment to supporting and caring for one another; gifts that as the essence of community are integral to sustaining the life and relationships intended within God's creation.



Aqua diluvii super terram
Flood Waters over the Earth
Salvador Dali 1964

Painted by Dali after the 1962 flash flood in Barcelona, which killed nearly a thousand people. The horror of mud and destruction is captured in the black menacing central form, but hope is also expressed in the ark and the dove behind.⁸

Endnotes

- 1 Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 11.
- 2 Sheriffs, *Old Testament Theology*, 3.4.
- 3 Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 9.
- 4 R. Wilbur, www.answers.com/topic/richard-wilbur
- 5 Jacques Ellul, cited in Dillard, *Pilgrim*, 35.
- 6 Hyers, *The Meaning of Creation*, 188.
- 7 D. Sheriffs, *How Long is Forever*, (LST, 2008) 50.
- 8 www.bible-art.info/Noah.htm

Wellington Theological Consortium Conference: Public Christianity: Is There Any Other Kind?

A grassroots event sponsored by the Consortium, University of Otago's Centre for Theology and Public Issues, People's Coffee, Urban Vision and LifePoint.

The conference will take place from 6.30pm to 8.45pm on Friday 27 August and from 9.30am to 4.00pm on Sunday 28 August.

It will take place at LifePoint Church, 61 Hopper Street, Mt Cook, Wellington. The cost of the conference is waged \$30.00 and unwaged /students \$10.00 for pre-registration.

The cost payable on the day is waged \$40.00 and unwaged /students \$15.00.

Please register through Tom Noakes Duncan on noakesduncan@gmail.com or Gavin Drew on gdrew@vodafone.co.nz.



Gift and grace in Paul: Some reflections after an Otago University paper



Again and again in Paul's letters the subjects of gift and grace come up in his correspondence with the churches he mentored. The grace of God, the gifts that God gives to us, and the gifts that individuals and churches confer on one another: all these are issues that were important to him and should be (so he believed) important to Christian communities. Translations used in different places ('undertaking', 'thanks', 'gift', 'blessing', 'grace' to give but a few examples) can obscure the fact that the same Greek word 'charis' means all of these.

Seeing the links between grace and gift can enrich our understanding of the ways God relates to us and we relate to God and to each other.

There's another factor involved too. Paul was writing within the Graeco-Roman world, in which a system of gift-giving was a known and established part of the way society operated. More than simply the giving of a gift was involved. A gift was given, accepted, and then a return gift was made. A key element in the process was the reciprocity involved in the giving of the counter-gift. The need to do this set up an obligation between the parties, which established or strengthened the relationship between them. Gift-giving in Graeco-Roman society was never one way: reciprocity was so central that the terms 'gift-giving' and 'gift-exchange' are virtually synonymous. At stake was the relationship between the parties: the one who received a benefit had an obligation to respond with honour and gratitude, and this in turn meant the original benefactor (who had thus become the beneficiary) was then obliged to respond with a further benefit. To put it simply, back then there was no such thing as a free lunch.

Even today, although we sometimes talk about 'a free gift' 'pure gift', we are aware of how gifts can create or strengthen a relationship. This is particularly so for non-Pakeha cultures, but even here we recognise the obligation that arises when a gift is given and accepted. To give an example: my Otago paper began

with a block course in Dunedin, during which I stayed with friends. What appropriate present could I bring to thank them for their hospitality?

If receiving a gift creates an obligation between people, what of God's gifts to us? For Paul, God is the source of all grace, and all gifts. And the gift which is above all gifts is the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. For Paul, the Christ-event is the definitive gift and the source of all other gifts. The death and resurrection of Christ, through which salvation comes to humanity, is for Paul an event so huge and all-encompassing that it takes precedence over all else. It is this grace, abundant by its very nature, that generates the abundance of gifts that are exchanged between the different churches. For example, the gift of Christ is 'the surpassing grace of God' given to the Corinthians (see 2 Corinthians 9:14), and the grace of God granted to the churches of Macedonia lies behind the monetary gifts which those very poor churches were able to make for as part of the collection for the church in Jerusalem.

Viewing gift and grace through the lens of Graeco-Roman gift-exchange can affect how we live and work together as members of the body of Christ. Accepting gifts from God – both the Christ-gift and the myriad other gifts which we are given – creates an obligation: to give thanks to God, and to share what we have been given with others. When we do this, we are taking up an opportunity to participate in God's abundant grace. It occurs to me that this has practical implications for how different ministry/mission units relate to each other within the diocese – giving to each other out of gratitude for what God has given to us, and sharing our surpluses with each other. What would Paul have made of that?

Canon Deborah Broome

Contact us

The Wellington Library is located based on the first floor of the Anglican Centre, 18 Eccleston Hill (off Hill Street), Thorndon, Wellington.

Contact Administrator/Librarian Ashley Edge at 04 472 1057 (library)

Contact Director Deborah Broome at 04 475-9085 or debroom@paradise.net.nz

The Palmerston North Library is located at St Peter's Church, 229 Ruahine St, Palmerston North.

Correspondence should be addressed to the WIT Council c/o the Anglican Centre.