

## Chapter Three

*(precis, November 2009, followed by fragments of text from earlier material in Chapter 1 and 2 awaiting rewriting)*

### **A Gospel beyond modern imagination**

*Following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his followers - enlivened with the gift of the Holy Spirit - proclaimed the Gospel in the wider Graeco-Roman world. In the New Testament the Apostles address the worldviews, assumptions and personal attachments of people inhabiting this wider world, calling them to yield up themselves and their world to new creation in the deeper context of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Here the drama of divine revelation and human embrace or evasion testified in the Old Testament takes on new expression. This drama has not been superseded by God's final revelation in Jesus Christ; rather, it has its defining enactment in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and in peoples' response to the Gospel of God's sovereign approach here.*

*The same drama has continued throughout Christian history as the Gospel has been proclaimed in the cultures of Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and beyond, and we continue to participate in this drama today. As implied by Chapters One and Two, the approach of God's kingdom is not to be equated simply with the formal adoption historically of the Christian religion, even though these are naturally linked. This is because, as we have noted, God may be evaded not only by explicitly rejecting God, but also by adopting a Christian religion secretly domesticated to ourselves and to the worldviews, assumptions and personal attachments which constitute our provisional contexts - a religion powerless to disclose the reality of God our ultimate context and to transform our provisional contexts - or else by yielding to a spiritual captivity which is Christian only in name.*

*Typically, domesticated Christian religion comprises assent to credal propositions, conformity to moral laws, and participation in worship under appointed authority within the institutional church. Such religion is driven by the desire for divine protection for a personal and cultural life lived within the context of habitual worldviews, assumptions and personal attachments. The Gospel calls us beyond such religion; it calls for the transformation of ourselves and the world comprising these provisional contexts, in the light of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.*

#### **Modern culture**

*The drama of Gospel proclamation and response takes on a distinctive form within modern culture. By 'modern' culture is meant the culture of societies which have originated in medieval Europe with the novel vision of state-organised 'civilisation' replacing and reforming traditional culture, beliefs and customs. Philosophers associated with the European Enlightenment played a vital part in the formulation of this vision.*

*The setting for this novel vision was a European society informed in its institutions of power, its social norms and its imaginative world by Christian religion. Medieval Christendom had sponsored freedom in many respects from domination by sacral authority, opening the way for dynamic social change. When that society became ravaged by religious wars, however, a secure basis was sought for the future of this society elsewhere than in Christian religion. This 'modern' future was sought in the innately good and rational individual and in the state as trustworthy legislator, educator and enforcer of a programme of civilisation among such individuals.*

*Fundamental to this modern vision was the conception of the individual human 'self' as autonomous agent and knowing subject. While this conception drew upon a Western classical heritage, it form substantially informed initially by a Christian imagination. However, this imagination has since been eroded in modern Western culture, and the conception has become more absolute and more distorted. Today our cultural imagination is dominated by false conceptions of the human 'self', of 'knowledge', and of the 'contexts' we inhabit as knowing subjects.*

*This gives rise to the distinctive modern cultural form of blindness and evasion towards God (and thus towards ourselves and the world). Dominated by our modern imagination, when we find ourselves encountered by God, our thinking about this gets distorted to the point of failure. Our thinking betrays, rather than faithfully testifying to, our encounter with God. Modern thinking also tends to pre-empt recognition of God as encountering us in the first place. Moreover, it also colludes practically with the evasion of God in general, by concealing this for what it is and indeed legitimising it. All of this finds expression not only in modern discourse (especially the discourse of those who seek to manage public social and political life) but also in the social 'plausibility structures' of the modern world.*

*The dominance of the modern imagination, increasingly severed from its roots in Christian faith, is associated today with both a striking decline of church life, and the distortion both of Western culture in general and of Christian religion itself by contemporary ideologies and consumerism. These tendencies and their history are explored in more detail in Part Three of this book.*

*The Gospel engages human blindness and evasion in this characteristic modern cultural form. Thus it integrally discloses ourselves, our knowledge and the context of our knowledge in the light of God's self-disclosing approach. This engagement sheds light in the first instance on four basic matters: (1) the fundamental nature of knowledge and evasion, fact and value, (2) the nature of the Gospel as transcendent and inculturated, and (3) the nature of the truly sacred.*

### **Knowledge and evasion, fact and value**

*The personal knowledge to which we are awakened by God's self-disclosure in Christ is integrally a matter of awe and worship. It comprises an unqualified personal responsiveness as God reveals himself which is already implicit in the desire and search for God. Whereas modern thinking tends to see 'knowledge' as objective, and 'value' as a subjective ascription to that which is known, here the 'value' of God is integral to his reality, and 'valuing' integral to apprehension of God for who he is in the first place.*

*The personal response of awe and worship which God evokes from us is integral to apprehension not only of himself, but also of ourselves and our world as his creation, seen for what they are.*

*Correspondingly, rejection of God's approach is not simply a subjective evaluation of God seen in detached observation; rather, evasion is integral here to our apprehension of God in the first place, and of ourselves and our world as his creation. In reality, when we imagine to view God in a detached way, we secretly dissociate ourselves in evasion from God's self-disclosure to us. Similarly, when we are overcome and disoriented by the demands of our responsiveness to God, valuing take on a distorted, self-deceived, spiritually captive form.*

### **A transcendent, inculturated Gospel**

*The approach of God our ultimate context breaks open every human context, including every cultural context. The Gospel of God's kingdom transcends any given culture, retaining always the power prophetically to challenge it; the Gospel can never properly be domesticated to any culture. Thus, ultimately culture is not the context of Gospel; rather Gospel is the context*

of culture. On the other hand, the Gospel always presents itself in contextual, inculturated form; it never stands apart from all contexts; it always engages and is mediated through our cultural and other contexts.

This presents a paradox to modern ways of thinking about knowledge on the one hand and context on the other. Modern thinking tends to conceive only universal truths on the one hand, and culturally relative practices, beliefs and values on the other. This modern way of thinking has been associated in recent decades with an unresolvable tension between theology 'from above' and 'from below', and between fundamentalist and culturally relative conceptions of the Gospel.

### **The truly sacred**

The approach of God in Jesus Christ also reveals at once the truly sacred and the definitive meaning of sacredness. True sacredness is encountered in God transcendent whose sovereign approach transforms our world in its entirety. Thus sacredness is not to be defined as a property assigned by divine mandate to particular phenomena (to the exclusion of others) within our familiar world. Rather, the world in its entirety is 'desacralised' and provisional relative to God's sacred approach. On the other hand, God always reveals to us his sacred purposes through our familiar world, which has been incorporated into these purposes since creation. Accordingly our familiar world is in no part outside of God's purposes, but points to its own destined fulfilment in new creation under the sovereign rule of God.

This similarly presents a paradox to modern ways of thinking. Modern thinking tends to conceive of a world of 'secular' reality uninformed by 'the sacred', and sets in contrast with this an 'enchanted', sacral or religious worldview. This way of thinking has confused attention both to the true meaning of 'sacredness' in Christ and to the true meaning of 'secular' reality.

A crucial step in the direction of recognising the truly sacred arose with the enlargement of 'holiness' from the ritual to the moral realm, where it imposes an unconditional requirement that we put ourselves in the place of the other. Persons and personal relationships are elevated to relatedness with the divine.

### **Truth and testimony, enquiry and dialogue**

To talk of God is to bear reverent witness to God who, revealing himself, draws us into personal knowledge of and participation in his vital self. The same is true, however, of our own talk now of our 'knowledge' and our 'context' in relation to God: what we say of these is not a matter of detached observation but of testimony. It is not a second-order account, but also remains always an act of enquiring attentiveness towards the mystery into which God continues to draw ourselves and others: our testimony always carries the implicit question (to both ourselves and others) 'Look as see: is it not so?' The same applies to our talk of evasion: we raise the question of this in the first instance with ourselves and with the other whom we address, raising the possibility (as appropriate) of confession and conversion. Testimony can be described as an interpersonal performative speech-act initiated by God and mediated by ourselves.

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A crucial step in the direction of recognising the truly sacred arose with the enlargement of 'holiness' from the ritual to the moral realm, where it imposes an unconditional requirement that we put ourselves in the place of the other. Persons and personal relationships are elevated to relatedness with the divine.

Also, this moral embodiment of the sacred makes a universal claim: it makes a claim which transcends the parts of a culture and transcends the culture itself, invoking responsibilities towards the alien. It remains the case in modern culture, that moral considerations are distinctive in vying with the authority of behavioural norms posited by subcultures of e.g. business, politics or sport.

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### **(God who approaches as our deepest context: the New Testament Church)**

New Testament writers are now shown to understand Jesus Christ as opening up *a new context* for living: through him God brings new life in renewed world. This new context calls for wholehearted response. Where this response is not forthcoming, the judgement of God is at hand. We trace how New Testament authors treat the distinctions which now arise in this new context between the kingdom of God, life lived by faith in Christ, life lived in rejection of Christ, and life before encounter with Christ. Encounter with Christ always remains an orientation, pointing forward into the future; hope in God's promises is not superseded, but enriched beyond measure. New life, knowledge, salvation, forgiveness, etc. all retain a future reference while incorporating our present participation.

### **On an inculturated Gospel:**

#### **1.1 Picturing God and culture**

How does the Gospel engage with culture? Let me begin by presenting an interpretative framework which is widely implicit in the pursuit of mission studies,

and which as I shall shortly demonstrate derives from the Gospel itself. I shall then show how this framework gets distorted by Western cultural habits of imagination, and how this distorted framework then gets used, in an odd inversion, as itself a framework for understanding (or rather, misunderstanding) the Gospel and its relation to culture.

Turning then to the Gospels and other writings of the New Testament, I shall explore more fully the meaning of our original framework as it originates in the Gospel. I shall take care to show how this, faithfully understood, resists the distortion and the inverted role vis-à-vis the Gospel which are introduced by Western cultural habits of imagination; and I shall show how these habits may be understood in the light of the Gospel.

How, then, does the Gospel engage with culture? It is widely recognised that the Gospel itself suggests a twofold framework for thinking about this. On the one hand, the Gospel is distinct from each and every particular culture. It always *comes to* a culture as the Good News of Jesus Christ. In so doing it sets that culture within God's action towards humankind in Jesus Christ, unfolds new meaning within it, and subjects it to new judgement. In this sense, as the Gospel *to* each and every culture, we must acknowledge the Gospel as always *transcending* human culture.

On the other hand, when the Gospel engages a particular culture it does so in terms of that culture itself. It speaks to the worldview, the symbols, the beliefs and practices of that culture. In so doing, in an important way it *relies upon* these and speaks in their terms. In this sense, as the Gospel *in* each and every culture, we must acknowledge the Gospel as always *inculturated* within human culture.

The Gospel, then, is always at once *transcendent over* and *inculturated in* culture. Now this twofold interpretative framework also indicates the form taken by basic distortions of the Gospel arising in cross-cultural mission. Corresponding to this twofold framework, two basic kinds of distortion arise. In the first kind, the Gospel gets presented to the inhabitants of a culture in terms which do not connect sufficiently with that culture. Whereas the Gospel properly engages with a culture in terms of that culture, so as to evoke joyful recognition as Good News to that culture, instead the Gospel gets presented in terms of another culture. Most often this 'other culture' is that of the missionary himself or herself which, having shaped his or her perception of the Gospel, is presented wittingly or otherwise as itself part of the Gospel. This happens easily because missionaries like other people are culturally influenced in their understanding of the world in ways often beyond their recognition. When this happens missionaries may with some reason be seen as 'agents of cultural imperialism', even though they may be unconscious of being so.

Alternatively, the 'other culture' imported to a culture with the Gospel is one which has been discerned in and constructed from the Bible, either by a missionary or by those to whom the Bible is brought, and this is then taken to be itself part of the Gospel. Here, aspects of the background culture of New Testament or Old Testament writers is taken to be part of the Gospel itself - although in truth the culture so constructed may unwittingly incorporate the cultural presuppositions of the person doing the constructing.

In each case we witness here an uncritical reliance upon certain imported cultural habits which are taken to be part of the Gospel, but are themselves in reality open to critique by the Gospel. In effect transcendence is ascribed habitually to elements in the religious tradition of another culture which are relative to that culture. People hearing the Gospel then understand themselves called in this regard to step out of their own culture and into this other culture. Conversion, as it seems to them, requires either that they transfer themselves into an 'alternative' religious culture, or otherwise that they live a life split between their own familiar culture and, in designated 'religious' settings, a supposedly religious culture.

This distortion of the Gospel involves the *false transcendence* of cultural elements within it. The Gospel is always at risk of distortion by such 'false transcendence'. To recognise this is not, however, to regard every claim for transcendence with respect to the Gospel as false. It is to allow still the possibility that when the Gospel comes and places a particular culture under judgement, it calls people to turn away from certain culturally accepted beliefs and practices in the act of turning to Christ. To identify the risk of 'false transcendence' is merely to point to the danger of *assuming habitually* that there is a need to turn away from existing cultural beliefs and practices in the name of the Gospel when in fact this may not necessarily amount to turning to Christ, but only turning to another culture, and may even amount to turning one's back on the message Christ intends for a particular culture.

The second kind of distortion found in cross-cultural mission arises when the Gospel becomes domesticated or captive to the culture which it addresses. Whereas properly the Gospel opens a culture to possession by God, instead the Gospel falls into the hands of a culture and become its possession. There is now no room for further dialogue between the Gospel and this culture; there is no opportunity for the Gospel to present this culture with anything new or challenging from God. Such distortion is commonly referred to as false accommodation or assimilation of the Gospel to a culture. Where such accommodation is towards overtly 'religious' aspects of a culture, it has been commonly referred to by the term 'syncretism'.

Again, the Gospel is always at risk of distortion by such false accommodation to culture. To recognise this is not however to regard every claim in pursuit of the inculturation of the Gospel as false. It to allow still the possibility that when the Gospel engages a particular culture, it engages features of that culture in such a way that these find their meaning fulfilled in Christ and incorporated thereby into the message of the Gospel. To identify the risk of false accommodation is merely to point to the danger of *assuming habitually* that cultural worldviews, beliefs and practices are consistent with the Gospel and find their fulfilment in Christ when they may rather come under judgement.

Adopting this interpretative framework, we shall see it as the Church's vocation faithfully to witness to the Gospel, transcendent and inculturated; and we shall recognise that this faithfulness is subverted in the tendencies of false transcendence and cultural captivity. We might add that this faithfulness is not to be achieved once and for all, but is a continuing pilgrimage. For we do not see all at once the light shed by the Gospel on each aspect of our culture; and meanwhile genuinely new situations present themselves to us repeatedly<sup>3</sup>. Faithfulness is a continuing pursuit both for the individual Christian and for the Church. For the individual Christian, faith involves



his or her being continually evangelised personally by the Gospel<sup>4</sup>. This includes a person being evangelised continually as a member of his or her culture, that is to say, being evangelised continually with respect to his or her cultural habits, appetites and assumptions. For the Church, new situations present themselves which demand new discernment towards the task of faithful witness, while old ways may lose some of, or change, their meaning. Famously, G. K. Chesterton, reflecting on the Church's adherence to orthodoxy down the centuries, described it as lurching one way and then another as new circumstances and new self-understanding raised new issues for the task of being faithfully orthodox.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, the interpretative framework I have presented originates in faith itself: as a theological framework it issues from the effort of 'faith seeking understanding'. As such it can give important support to and protection for faith. However it cannot take the place of faith itself, but stands under it. At the heart of faith itself lies that continuing lively, discerning attentiveness to God from which flow also cultural self-awareness, renewed understanding of our vocation in this context, and renewed discernment towards distortions of the Gospel. Such attentiveness is indispensable. Without it we do not know, as our situation changes, whether we are presented with true transcendence or false, and whether we are met with authentic inculturation or false accommodation to culture.

It is here that the issue arises, in a critical way, of Western cultural presuppositions. For Western culture fosters habits of thought and imagination which hinder both faith itself and faithful use of the interpretative framework above as a support to faith. The consequences of this for the Church and its mission are dire.

### **God's approach in Christ reveals the truly sacred**

In archaic, 'sacral' societies the world is divided between the sacred and the profane. In the Bible God acts towards, and through, his people at once to desacralise the world and to bring the whole of life - not just 'religious' practices - into relationship personally and ethically with God. In Christ, God brings to fulfillment this engagement.

In the spread of the Gospel, new cultures are transformed by this engagement which redefines the sacred. However, the Church has not always resisted the temptation to sacralise its own offices or to collude with pagan sacral beliefs and practices, which persist tacitly even in so-called secular society today (see Part Three of this book).