

THE GLASS CATHEDRAL: Language, Imagery and Leadership

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THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES are human organizations with human leaders. They have the same investment as other organizations in establishing appropriate leadership. In doing so they have to deal with issues of language and imagery. Language and imagery determine the way we think and feel. They also give content to our thoughts and feelings. I believe that there are deep misunderstandings about the relation of language and imagery in today's Church and that these inhibit both our communication with the world and our self-understanding.

So what are these misunderstandings? Here is an obvious one. At times of discovery and danger, such as our own, there is pressure on Church leaders to negotiate a common language. Division scandalizes the body. We are also afraid of the cold world outside. We set up commissions to discover what we agree about. ARCIC is an example. It sets out to seek the common ground between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. It meets, it reports. It finds we agree about a lot. Yet there is no sign of unity. England is the problem, and the spiritual history of England. Two rival bishops reign in every part of the English realm, as they have for four hundred years. Words on paper make no difference. Why? Because, with all the good will in the world, it is not words that divide us. It is what lies *behind and within* the words we use to speak of, or to, God. Here are a multitude of ambiguous memories to which we have access only through symbols. ARCIC may deliberate about what Anglicans and Roman Catholics have in common, but the very name of Margaret Clitherow stirs me to remember the primitive content of our relationship, which is founded in difference and articulated in persecution, blood, wounds, exclusion, treachery, death. Failure to find common language sets the agenda for the

future, because what cannot be incorporated has to be anathematized. Success is almost always small-scale and rarely visible. The problem is that once things have to be expressed in theological language a battle for control is already going on. The battle lines are not always obvious, but they reflect decisions about the relationship between words and images, between what can be accessible and what remains unconscious in the common memory of believers. One of the problems for our leaders is that the decisions involved are not open or obvious. Leaders often act as if language were all, which it is not. And as if religious language were simple, straightforward and everyday, which it is not.

Words and the body of Christ

Words, however, are what define the body of the Church. That is why so much intellectual energy goes into words, into theology. Theology always wants to have the last word. By declaring, the Church divides. Words subtract the outsiders from the insiders, add the insiders together and give them the hope of multiplication. The mathematics of faith is in credal formulae. Think of the Nicene Creed or the Chalcedonian definition. To assent to the right credal formula is to have body, substance, within the True Body, once the measurements of that body have been declared. This process of declaration and division is inevitable. I do not intend here to criticize it. There is a sharpness in the Christian definition of the True Body. It involves our identification with the crucified Jesus. The True Body is a body that knows pain.

And here I must declare my own interest. I came to faith as an anxious and bewildered teenager in the 1960s, unsure of what to do with painful self-doubts and God-doubts. I think it was the desire to *belong* to a true body, and therefore to have substance, which drove me first to evangelical faith and then to study theology at university. It also drove me later to work with spoken words in radio, and with words and images in television. To talk about God or to look for the visible signs and symbols of God has been a quest and a task.

Discovering structures through Karl Barth and Gerald Vann

Studying theology at Cambridge was a tremendous excitement to me. I began to understand that the Christian faith had its own inner logical structure. I developed a mental image of Christianity as a vast cathedral of glass and crystal, to which every age and

religious movement added spires and icons, crypts, arches, vaults and cloisters. I was able to test my troubled faith against Irenaeus and Augustine, Paul and Job. Into my head went Greek verbs and Hebrew verse, ancient anathemas and tomes, pages and pages from biblical commentaries. On the last day of my finals, a hot bright day, I sat on the grass beside the River Cam and wept because I knew I would never know so much again. Perhaps I also knew that I had reached the end of a certain way of knowing, that the next stage would be darker and more difficult.

I became fascinated by the theology of Karl Barth. Barth confessed once on television that if he had not been a theologian he would like to have been a traffic controller. For him, the Word of God was ultimate power and peace spoken into our human mess. His belief in the all-sufficiency of God's Word was almost Islamic in its majesty and simplicity. And yet when he speaks of the Word of God he does not mean what fundamentalists mean, whether they are Muslim or Christian. The Word is not a book. The Word is not a word. The Word is always the Word that is to be, and is: the Word made flesh, the word in-corporate, always beyond us, and yet given in grace into our midst.

I would have called myself a Barthian and yet Barth was not the only influence on my thinking. I had also read, and been equally excited by Gerald Vann, the Dominican, who had absorbed a great deal from Jung. He had a quite different estimate of human experience from that of Barth. For Vann, Christ the Word of God exalted human myth to the point where it foreshadowed divine revelation. He knew that the liturgy of the Church incorporated the primitive power of symbols. I was enraptured by his exposition of the paschal liturgy in *The water and the fire*. I became fascinated by Catholic ritual and wrote dense and Eliotesque religious dramas which were performed in Cambridge college chapels.

Looking back on this now I can see that I was living an intellectual contradiction. The Calvinist and the Catholic were at war within me, and yet I needed both. Yet neither were as simple as they seemed. The clash between them, and within the thought of each, was a painful one, and for years I thought it reflected a mental split or lack of integration within my own personality. Only gradually have I come to see that my need to operate as a believer at more than one level, even if there is contradiction, comes from a genuine insight into the dialectical relationship of words and images within religion itself. And yet my experience of working in

a beleaguered and anxious Church has made me think that Christians do not really want to explore this dialectic. There is a great desire for explanation. There is a longing for truth to be simple and unambiguous. It would be so much easier if the Word could be translated simply, unambiguously, into words.

Put another way, what I was discovering was that the desire to control or to be controlled is a fairly predictable way of coping with anxiety. Yet it does not wholly work. Whatever the traffic policemen of religious life may say, huge regions of our being work at the level of bodily experience and primitive emotion. We are God's animals, and not for nothing do we have the capacity to sing and cry and dance and clap our hands. This in its turn gives us problems. For it makes us vulnerable to charismatic leaders, who release our longing to by-pass the critical mind. They offer us a fusion of word and symbol which is superficially attractive and plausible. Bright smiles and warm hugs show that we are kingdom people, invulnerable to criticism or disaster. Yet charismatic leaders put us under emotional controls which are even more oppressive and damaging than the control that comes through the possession and manipulation of language.

What words and symbols do to each other

The fact that we are often blind to these problems is interesting in itself. It reflects our intolerance of religious anxiety, our endless longing to be comfortable. Yet words will always have the capacity to criticize images. Symbols will always have the power to subvert language. A living Church knows both and is open to both without imagining that it can wholly control either. Today's Church prefers to work with the verbal and rational. It accepts the longing for explanation which is dominant in our society. So there are frantic attempts to simplify and explain symbolism in order to *de-fuse* its primitive power. Symbols are dangerous at a time like ours because they both reveal and conceal the divine. We would prefer God to be *available*, unrevealed, and strictly on our terms. But symbols that hide and hint at God can be neither destroyed nor explained. They occupy the ambiguous middle ground between the Creator and the creation. Elemental signs like water, fire and light are always with us and carry mythic power. They can be smashed and drastically re-interpreted, but they cannot be destroyed. Church leaders act as switching devices. They are needed to enable the current to flow across our resistances, but they do not have control

over the current itself. The switches are moved by unseen hands, which include the social, economic and psychological forces pulling and pushing at the Church without and within.

I think of how the images of our Church leaders are affected by these powers. Michael Ramsey was ridiculed by television pundits when he was the Archbishop of Canterbury. His stutter, his twinkling eyes and absent-minded air projected an image of irrelevance in the technologically confident 1960s. Television satirists wrote him off as a comic old duffer. But by the troubled 1980s the same image suggested wisdom, spiritual depth and poise. When he died he was seen as a kind of saint. He had very little control over either of these processes. He neither welcomed them nor tried to stop them. Yet they happened. And somewhere in and over those happenings, and the timing of them, is God, who is sovereign over the powers of this age and the age to come.

The imagery of leadership—fission and fusion

I believe that Christian leaders need to be both fluent and humble about the language and imagery they receive from tradition. They must be prepared to bear the symbols of office without denying them and without being fused with them. This is extremely difficult. It is easier to try to establish control over the imagery of leadership; either by separating from it in denial or by fusing with it in grandiosity.

An example of denial. There are reports that one bishop from the Church of England's evangelical tradition liked to have his mitre carried before him instead of wearing it. He may have done so with the best of intentions, hoping, perhaps, to express the fact that episcopal authority was not his personal possession, but a gift to the Church. The gesture backfired for two reasons. First, because it looked like a judgement on his fellow bishops, who wore their mitres in conventional ways; and second, because it provoked guilt and anger in the congregation who, rightly in my view, saw it as a dishonest denial of the real power that goes with the job. The refusal to bear the symbols of leadership betrays those in whose name the symbolism has been conferred. They may even feel manipulated, for the bishop's authority, if limited, is real, and who wants to be under the authority of someone who pretends not to have any? With the authority and its symbols goes real limitation.

But what about the dangers of fusion? Catholic theology insists that priesthood is not a matter of performing certain religious

functions, it involves a fundamental change of character. The person is fused with the symbol and Jo Smith becomes a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. There is something touching about this. Soft women weep at ordinations, and who can blame them? The problem is what happens to Jo Smith, who is made in God's image? Often he is killed off in reality as well as in religious theory by being fused with the powerful persona of the priest. Now Jo Smith can see himself as a stronger, firmer, truer self, as long as he maintains the illusion that he really is different from others and from his former self. There is much to support the illusion. He has status, authority and, above all, power. This is cleverly concealed by the language of discipleship, sacrifice and commitment. The imagery of priesthood is dangerously attractive to those whose self-esteem is wounded, who can hide from their humanity by being fused with powerful and primitive symbols.

The paradox of exaltation and humiliation

Of course we all want our leaders to be special, to have charisma, to be attractive and desirable. But we also need them to be human, to be able to take off the glitter and glamour and roll up their sleeves like the rest of us. We need our leaders to be strong, to be significant for us and on our behalf. But this is not so easy. For the symbolism of leadership that the Church employs is more complex than that which elevates the business executive, because within the Church's memory is the fact of Christ's humiliation, and the images of desolation and crucifixion that accompany that fact.

The outcome of a leader's self-commitment to God is not always easy to read. I am still puzzled by two images that have stayed in my mind from the Pope's visit to Britain. When the Pope came to this country the event was well covered on television. His visit to Canterbury was a startling event. As an Anglican I was deeply moved by the well-planned shot of the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury walking side by side through the cloisters of the cathedral. The Archbishop wore cope and mitre, the Pope wore a simple white soutane. To me it was an image of humility. A pilgrim Pope recognizing the spiritual authority of an Archbishop of the English Church. It was dignified, quiet, gracious and very Anglican! The same afternoon the Pope celebrated an outdoor mass at the vast football stadium of Wembley. He stood in the glassed car as the crowds thundered applause, like a white warrior

in a crystal chariot, come to claim his own. I was as shocked by the triumphalism of the second image as I had been moved by the humility of first. At Canterbury British religious history seemed suddenly open to the springtime. At Wembley centuries of tribal difference were being affirmed.

This is why I believe there are such difficulties with the whole concept of leadership within Christian tradition. The baffling model is Jesus, who both disclaimed power and yet evidently wielded it. Indeed, the energy of Christianity flows from its central image of the Son of God dying on the cross. How can this image of humiliation break human hearts and cause hope to spring from nowhere? What does it mean that the king of the universe reigns from the tree? All our images of God, all our symbols of power are judged by this shocking contradiction. The defaced image of God pours un-interpretable possibility from an open wound.

The icons of Yuri Titov

It takes modern equivalents to bring such conundrums to life. I think of the case of Yuri Titov, the Russian dissident, who was treated for psychiatric disturbance in Soviet mental hospitals. Titov was also an artist. Some of his most haunting paintings evoke the power of icons. The face of Christ looks out on a fragmented landscape which represents Soviet life. Barbed wire, a broken candle, the side of a building lit up by fire. The landscape reminds one of the tawdry propagandist art that is common in communist Russia. The face of the icon was wholly traditional. Titov was eventually allowed to leave the Soviet Union for exile in France. I believe that he made it a condition of his release that his work should go with him. His paintings were packed into crates for the journey. But when the crates were opened it was discovered that acid had been leaked over the paintings and they had been destroyed. Why?

Both Titov's themes were familiar; it was their juxtaposition that people found so intolerable. From the fragmented background, the eternal eyes of the Word of God look out at us. Not from heaven, but from hell. It is too much to say that Titov was explicitly criticizing the state for bringing about a social hell. The images are too subtle and too universal for that. They simply express the torment of all men and women of our age who seek both to be true and to know God. Yet his enemies saw them as hugely

judgemental and destructive. In defacing them beyond repair they tell us all that they were true.

Fundamentalism and liberalism—two ways of having the last word

Theology always wants to have the last word, to explain images in words so that they become controllable. Fundamentalist theology does this by fusing images to pre-determined interpretations, so there can be no criticism of image by word, or subversion of word by image. No wonder fundamentalists are so rigid! They cannot move. Their joints are locked in a defensive posture.

But liberal theology is no better or more creative in its approach to images. Liberals also want control, and what is more, they believe they can have it.

On a number of occasions I have been invited by Church groups with broadly liberal sympathies to write scripts on Christian themes. I have often used and have invented fictional characters to make the themes live and to place the ideas within a human context. Inevitably, once the characters start to develop in my imagination they break out of the theological controls they were intended to personify. In other words, they become human, messy and ambiguous. Sometimes there has come a point with my Church sponsors at which the freedom of the characters to be themselves causes anxiety. That is when there are worried looks and talk of explanatory handbooks. Explanatory handbooks are written which carefully explain the characterizations in acceptable ways, consonant with the current version of orthodoxy. What is going on? Does the Church still not understand that symbolic stories are more powerful than its explanations? In my worst moments I wonder whether there may be a desire to use a narrative medium solely to get an audience. But once the story is set up, its resonances have to be controlled by doctrine. It is as if the Word becomes flesh only to become word again in the hands of the interpreters. On the other hand I recognize how maddening it must be to hire a craftsman and then find that they have difficulty saying exactly what you want them to say. And not only aesthetic difficulty, but theological difficulty.

Yet symbols, just because they are not really recognized by liberals, can play some strange tricks, which reveal the raw hunger for power that lies behind liberal movements in the Church. Vatican II helped to bring about a new evaluation of the role of the laity. The use of the vernacular in the liturgy expressed the

access that ordinary people now had to the central rite of the Church. Of course this change was enormously liberating. It made faith come alive for millions of people. Yet the interesting thing is that change did not come about as a result of pressure from the laity, rather from theological ideas generated by priests and bishops. The Church's best scripture scholars, pastors and liturgists decided what was needed, and when the reforms came, they were drastically and universally imposed from above.

What was really going on? Alongside the gains and benefits was a massive exercise of power by the liberal clergy. The symbolism of this creeps in, largely unrecognized, through the back door in the way the mass has come to be staged. In the bad old days of Latin the rite was celebrated facing eastward. From God's point of view, priest and people looked in the same direction. Now the priest celebrates facing the congregation. What is more, there is often a concelebration with a whole caste of priests looking down upon the people. Whatever may be said in words about lay participation, the imagery says that the laity are being led, directed and controlled. The priest stands in their eyeline, in the place of God. Never mind that God is everywhere and does not live six feet behind the altar. Ritual works on the level of the primitive or it does not work at all, and small children know very clearly where God is located. God is the direction of the priest's gaze when he looks away from the people, but when he looks towards the people God is where the priest is. Never mind that God is in the fellowship, in my neighbour, in our midst and in my heart. All that is to be learnt, discovered, often in agony. At the level of the primitive, God is the horizon of my looking: 'I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence does my help come?' (Ps 121,1).

The glass cathedral

I am learning that Christianity is essentially a lay faith, that its language is provisional and that its images are what endure, simply because they are endless and open to many meanings.

Christian leaders are to be supported but not necessarily trusted, for they are already compromised by their acceptance of power. They need us more than we need them. Recognizing this has helped me to understand why I am attracted to Barth. Barth's theology floats alone and unsupported by any theory of psychology or metaphysics. It is splendidly isolated and magisterial. But, and some see this as a weakness, Barth has never been followed by a

school of faithful scribes and interpreters. Disciples he has, and they are many, but they are a rebellious lot, never contented with the master's opus, never assuming that his last word could ever be their last word. Barth's *Church dogmatics* stands on my bookshelves in thirteen volumes, and is itself a symbol of the richness and intensity of his construction. It is longer than the *Summa theologica*. But Barth, like Aquinas, knows the limits of theology. He was not, after all, a traffic policeman, controlling the flow of religious thoughts and feelings, measuring the Body by excluding the outsiders. Instead, he assumes you are an outsider and, with wit and some sympathy, invites you in. Open a volume and you are in a great glass cathedral, whose spires wind their way to heaven. It is open both outside and in, it is transparent to everything and yet stands firm, like that 'tall city of glass' which R. S. Thomas calls 'the laboratory of the spirit'.

For Barth, theology is a free and humble science. It is not invention but response, and therefore is in no danger of ever being finished, for its object, God, is infinite. Of course, Barth is a Calvinist, he is a theologian of the Word. Yet his understanding of the Word makes one aware that he uses words as symbols as well as to declare facts. Yet words used as symbols are not fused to words used to declare facts. He never tells you there is a difference, but he knows the difference is crucial and belongs to our salvation. He does not deal in imagery because imagery is already crucial to his system. He respects fundamentalists more than liberals, but he does not belong to either. Nor is he interested in symbols. He does not discuss them or interpret them. What he does instead is simply to tell the Christian story. As he does so, the glass cathedral stands. Within it we recognize its infinite fragility and its impossible strength.