Theological Trends

PROBLEM, MYSTERY AND GRACE

By NORMAN YOUNG

IN A RECENT MONOGRAPH, *Discerning the mystery*,[1] Andrew Louth maintains that theological method depends for its validity on differentiating between problem and mystery. Although I am not entirely convinced by his additional claim that concern for the mysterious is at the heart of the humanities whereas at the heart of the sciences is concern for the problematic, I have become increasingly aware of the need to distinguish between problem and mystery in theological discussion.

It was not always so. One of the first things I remember about being a theology student in the 1950s was being confronted with the claim that every important statement about God is ultimately a paradox. Now that was pretty heady stuff for a nineteen-year-old, especially the implication that 'if any statement about God is true then its opposite is just as true'. For example, 'God is far above our thought or imagining, yet closer to us than breathing'. That was very exciting for one who had been brought up in the sciences, most recently in a course on textile chemistry where, if you got it wrong, your failure was evident. But in theology, it seemed, you could not get it wrong; one view was just as good as its opposite.

Of course experience soon taught me that it is possible to get it wrong. What I got wrong then, I have come to realize, was at least this, that I did not realize the difference between problem and mystery. To believe that the being of God and thus God's relation to us is fundamentally mystery is not to imply that *nothing* can be known about the mystery, and certainly not that it does not matter what you say about it, although what *is* said often falls into the area of problem, and that is what makes theological discourse possible, necessary and worth while.

In ordinary conversation, of course, we often use the words 'problem' and 'mystery' interchangeably, or use 'mystery' just for a problem that has not yet been solved. Nevertheless there are two underlying realities that are different and that can usefully be distinguished: we name as 'problem' something that is to be solved, whereas 'mystery' is not to be solved at all but to be recognized, shared and appropriated. 'Mystery' is not itself to be understood, but its recognition informs our own understanding of the world and ourselves.

So, for example, the question: what is the best procedure for selecting candidates for the ministry of the Church? That is a problem to which different solutions are offered by different churches and in different eras. Some would say that it is a problem for which no satisfactory solution has yet been found. But why on earth should some be gifted and called for ministry *at*

all? That is a mystery to be recognized and shared, one aspect of the more fundamental mystery of God's calling a people into being in the first place who were not made for themselves but to be servants of the Word, by whom all things were called into being in the beginning. But to recognize the mystery of call to and gifting for ministry does not end reflection and discourse on the subject. How are gifts to be exercised? What is the relationship between the various ministries? Are they all to be open to women and men? In what sense do they all belong to the one apostolic ministry? How are these ministries to be used for building up the Church for service in the world? These are problems to be solved in the light of the mystery, and the solutions shape both thought and action as well.

My main contention in this paper, therefore, is not only that there is a difference between problem and mystery, but that recognizing both the difference and the relation between the two is of considerable importance in many areas of Christian thought and action.

In education, for example, parents and teachers are equally aware that rearing children and teaching them involve many problems for which we seek solutions by reading books, going to seminars, applying techniques, gaining experience. But after all that has been done as well and as carefully as it must be, genuine learning is still a mystery. Somehow the various components in the learning process come together so that the accumulation of information and experience becomes something more. New meaning is found as the path to true wisdom is followed. Indeed, according to Polanyi, all knowing is mystery. How is it, he asks again and again, that we come to hear not just vocal sounds but *meaning*? Of course it is not necessary to believe in God in order to recognize a mysterious dimension to knowing and learning, but such recognition does help the Christian to understand better what ought to be distinctive about Christian education. It is not just that the *content* of the teaching derives from biblical faith, but that the *aim* is nothing less than to be grasped by the power of 'new being' in Christ, as Paul Tillich put it. This 'new being' is within the community of faith and love which is the Church, herself called to proclaim in word and act God's renewing purpose for the whole creation.

In many other disciplines too, where we are dealing with problems of method, approach and techniques, it seems to me that we become aware of the dimension of mystery. In counselling, for example, most of the approaches, even the purely secular, acknowledge in some way the mysterious depths of human resourcefulness and resilience that can be tapped. The believer would identify these depths as the God-given power of recuperation and renewal. In homiletics and liturgical studies too there is a mystery–problem link. How to preach the mystery of God in Christ not with plausible words of wisdom but by the Spirit and with power? How, in worship, to participate in the mystery of God-with-us without resorting to mystifying contrivances on the one hand, or obliterating all sense of the transcendent on the other?

In apologetics and philosophy of religion the problem–mystery issue was most thoroughly addressed by Gabriel Marcel, especially in his Gifford

Lectures *The mystery of being*.[2] There he draws the distinction between the two in a much more sophisticated way than I have here, and this provides the nucleus of his whole argument.

> A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity. A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined; whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends every conceivable technique.[3]

But it was in the area of biblical studies particularly that I became aware of the need to consider more carefully the problem–mystery relationship, as I came to recognize a recurring pattern in many biblical passages. Within many narratives there is a built-in puzzle, a surprise that brings the reader up with a start, a problem that engages the attention and invites the attempt to solve it. But having worked through the puzzle, one finds disclosed or illuminated some facet of the underlying mystery of God's being and action. The more I looked, the more examples of this pattern came to light. It may be, of course, that this is the preacher in me applying a homiletical framework to the text. On the other hand, biblical scholars have been urging us for years to see the New Testament itself as proclamation. Therefore a homiletical framework is by no means alien to the text, so that faithful preaching in our time is not only dependent upon the biblical writings but is also in continuity with the intention of the writers.

A good example, I think, is the parable of the workers in the vineyard, where those labourers hired late in the day, working fewer hours than the rest, received the same wage. The problem is clear enough: the system of payment seems so unfair. What an unjust householder, and what a disastrous policy for industrial relations! Imagine the reaction of the grape-pickers' union! And is the parable supposed to illustrate that standard of fairness we are to expect in the kingdom of heaven? Without doubt this is a problem, and some people, biblical commentators among them, have tried to solve it by exonerating God the householder by maintaining that such practice really did make good sense, given the agricultural conditions in the Middle East where crops ripen very quickly; even half a day too long and they can spoil. So, it is argued, it was really common sense to pay later workers a premium to ensure the grapes were picked in time. 'Enterprise bargaining' we call it these days.

However, that kind of solution to the problem blunts the whole point of the parable and fails to disclose the mystery at the heart, the mystery of the creator's way with human beings. God does *not* deal with us according to the human patterns of hirer to labourers, king to subjects, master to servants. God does not deal with us as we deserve at all.

Now a homily on that parable would usually go on, 'And that's great news, isn't it? Except for the self-righteous and the deluded who think they've got it made and who are counting on a greater reward in heaven than those who just scrape in at the last moment, as it were. No, this parable says, none of us deserves our place in God's realm. We are part of the kingdom, all of us equally, simply and solely because of the mystery of God's grace.' That kind of homily is, I think, in faithful continuity with the New Testament proclamation. I certainly hope it is, as I have preached it. But notice that it goes beyond the actual parable itself. Taken on its own, the parable warrants little more than the conclusion that since God is the creator of all, people are given their place in the kingdom on whatever terms the creator chooses, and no one has the right to dispute those terms. There is, of course, the strong hint in the conclusion that these terms are shaped by grace. 'Do you begrudge me my generosity?' asks the householder of those who complained. Nevertheless, those who worked all day might well have felt that this generosity was a touch selective.

So, in order to see this parable as disclosing that God's dealing with us is not just a mystery, but is in fact a mystery *of grace*, we need to recognize that the one telling the parable is also the one who embodies God's way with us, making this known through his self-giving life and death as the way of grace. And that, according to the New Testament, is the heart of the mystery – God with us and for us in Jesus Christ – in the light of which we both understand and live by the gospel.

The same point can be made in a slightly different way by considering another parable, in relation to which the word 'mystery' (Greek, *mysterion*) appears for the only time in the Gospels, the parable of the sower. Most of the seed that was scattered was lost for one reason or another, but some fell on fertile soil and grew to fruitful harvest. Now the problem for the disciples was that they did not understand the significance of the parable at all and had to ask Jesus what it meant. Of course, at one level, anyone could understand it. The disciples knew quite well that what the parable describes is the random scattering of seed when it is broadcast. At another level most could see it as a metaphor for what happens whenever the word is preached. But the underlying mystery is disclosed only when it is recognized that in the person who told the parable, and in other ways was sowing the word, God's kingdom had already dawned. That is the secret that Jesus shared with his disciples, a sharing which in no way dissolves the mystery but reveals its heart: God's acting in Jesus Christ to bring about the promised kingdom, 'the incursion of the divine rule in the word and work of Jesus', as Bornkamm put it.[4]

However, having moved in our consideration of this parable from the problem of meaning to recognition of the underlying mystery, we should not then conclude that there is nothing more to be said. In the first place there are consequent exegetical and theological problems to be tackled specifically with this parable, for example in Jesus' enigmatic assertion in Mark's version that the mystery is conveyed in parables *so that* people may hear but not

understand (Mk 4:12). Second, there are connections to be followed up with other New Testament passages, for example Paul's insistence that the mystery is not just of God with us in Jesus, but in Jesus the one crucified (1 Cor 1:18ff), and risen from the dead, 'the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20). So it is that we not only behold the mystery but also participate in it, sharing the victory God gives over sin and death. Thus when, in the eucharistic liturgy, we proclaim the mystery of faith, 'Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again', we are in continuity with the life and faith of the New Testament communities.

Of course there have always been some, probably a majority, who cannot or will not see this as mystery at all, but simply as a problem to be solved by refuting one of its terms. Jesus was not the Christ, for example, or did not die on the cross but fainted, later to be revived. Or Jesus was not raised from the dead; that was just a story put about by his followers, or is merely a graphic way of asserting his ongoing importance. And Jesus will not come again; to say that he will is unfounded projection into the future of our own unfulfilled hopes. Marcel has a word to say about this kind of approach:

> It is, no doubt, always possible (logically and psychologically) to degrade a mystery so as to turn it into a problem [because seen as] illusion that deceives others. But this is a fundamentally vicious proceeding whose springs might perhaps be discovered in a corruption of the intelligence.[5]

We may well think that this judgement of Marcel's was itself bordering on the vicious, but for the purpose of my argument it is enough to grasp that whether God-with-us in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is affirmed as mystery or dissolved in a process of problem-solving does make a significant difference. It affects not only how we think about the faith, but also how we live our lives in response.

What I have so far been arguing, therefore, comes to this: if theological reflection is to be informed by the biblical witness, not just in its content but also by its method, then it will not seek to diminish the dimension of mystery that properly belongs to God, whose ways are not our ways nor thoughts our thoughts. But neither will it appeal to the dimension of mystery in order to excuse undisciplined thought or obscurantist language that merely tries to mystify without enlightening. Instead, theological reflection will seek to explore the various aspects of the mystery, the way its several facets fit together, if you will, in order to disclose the way of the creator with the creation which we discern as the way of grace. Reflection will at the same time seek to draw out implications from all this for how we are to live in the present and face the future, and that does involve grappling with problems and trying to solve them.

In this second section I want to illustrate this approach – from problem to underlying mystery in whose light consequent problems are tackled – by

looking briefly at the hymn in Philippians 2 and the terms in which it proclaims the mystery of Christ Jesus:

> who, though he was in the form of God
> did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
> but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,
> being born in the likeness of men.
> And being found in human form he humbled himself
> and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.
> Therefore God has highly exalted him . . .

So much can be said about this which bears on our theme that only an outline of the salient points can be offered.

First, this passage clearly illustrates my contention that to discern the mystery of God with us in Jesus Christ does not imply that nothing more can be said. In these sentences from Philippians and in what follows there is much more than a citing of the mystery. Its various facets are set before us and various implications drawn.

Second, the mystery does not derive from God's unknowability in some timeless sphere, but is grounded, as Dom Gregory Dix put it in his classic work on the liturgy, 'in a solid temporal event wrought out in one man's flesh and blood on a few particular square yards of a hillock outside a gate, under Pontius Pilate'.[6] Therefore our participation in this mystery is not absorption into some timeless and rarified sphere. Our *worship*, specifically in the eucharist, always includes a setting forth of what happened once for all in Jesus Christ; and our *life of faith* is not disengagement from the realities of this world but an ongoing involvement in the creator's life with the creation. That is why the term 'spirituality', of which we are hearing more and more, must be understood in the Christian context as describing a way of life lived in the world in faithful obedience, not as a technique for withdrawal into the otherworldly.

Third, that early hymn of the Church is quoted here by Paul so that the community at Philippi will be moved to act together in conformity with the will of Christ. It is introduced in this way: 'Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God . . .'. And this was more than a call to right thinking, although at one level it was that. It was also a call to appropriate action. So our view of the mystery should lead not to spinning webs of abstract speculation, but to drawing out and following implications for how we are to live the life of faith in the world.

Fourth, to work out what *shape* a life of faith is to take involves further reflection. Thus the problem which exegetes in their role as theologians properly address, namely, of what did Christ divest himself in taking the form of a servant, has implications for both theories of incarnation and for Christian discipleship. If, for example, the Son gave up *all* power and authority, then Christians who have a mind to follow him are called to welcome powerlessness and to be suspicious of all authority. But if we understand that Jesus did

not give up all power and authority, but rather all claim to use it *except* in love for the sake of others, then his followers will see power and authority in a different light: not as to be renounced altogether but to be used in ways that are congruent with the way of Christ. And that does seem to be the better reading, for did he not use power to heal and exercise authority to forgive sins?

Fifth, it is significant that this setting forth of the mystery is one of the Church's earliest hymns for, while drawing out the implications of 'God with us' calls for discourse and problem-solving, talking of the mystery itself needs the language of analogy, of metaphor, of poetry. Over the years my theology lectures have included frequent reference to hymns, because hymns are able to convey the heart of the matter in language that is both clear and evocative, both disclosing and retaining the mystery. So, for example, I may talk about the work of Christ, with particular reference to the relation between justification and sanctification and perfection, regeneration and eschatology, grace, faith and hope. Now hear what Charles Wesley invites us to sing:

> Jesus, the first and last,
> On thee my soul is cast.
> Thou didst the work begin
> By blotting out my sin.
> Thou wilt the root remove
> And perfect me in love.
>
> But when the work is done,
> The work is but begun;
> Partaker of the grace,
> I long to see thy face.
> The first I prove below,
> The last I die to know.

Another characteristic of hymns is that they not only shed light on the mystery, but they also move us to participate in it as we sing the story of our communal life and faith. 'Have this mind among yourselves' Paul says, and the hymn that follows is a paradigm for hymns at their best: 'a means by which the body of Christ makes real its corporate nature' as the Preface to the British collection *Hymns and psalms* says. It goes on:

> The distinctive feature of hymnody is that it unites the intellect, the emotions, the will and the voice in response to God's grace, and at the same time points us beyond our human faculties and abilities, for God addresses us in hymns, and through them applies the good news of Jesus Christ to our lives.[7]

For some time now Christian educators, biblical scholars and theologians have been preoccupied with what is called 'narrative theology'. I do not think

that they all mean the same thing by that term, but they have in common the recognition of the story quality of much of the biblical witness. They recognize that the proclamation and reflection that arises out of the witness must, if it is to be authentic, take account of that narrative form. And 'taking account' here does not mean simply recognizing the form and bringing to bear appropriate analytical and interpretative tools; it means that whatever literary, linguistic, exegetical or theological skills are brought to bear, they must stand in the service of actually retelling the story in such a way that it can be appropriated anew.

In this retelling and appropriating anew, hymns are uniquely valuable. They tell the story of the great saving acts of God in creation, in the history of the world; of the community of faith and of men and women whose lives have been transformed; and they look forward, at least the best of them, to the end of the story to which God is bringing us all. In singing those hymns, on the one hand we become part of the story, part of the narrative; and on the other, both the hymns and the event they witness to become part of our story. On certain occasions we find that in the actual singing we do more than give voice to the faith we already have. We experience resurgent faith, even a new dimension of being. Not only do we sing of the mystery of God with us and for us ('How can it be that thou my God should'st die for me?'), we come to know for ourselves the mystery of lives transformed by that divine grace.

Sixth, and finally, we are reminded in this passage in Philippians that it is a *community*, a community of faith, that is brought into being by the mystery of God-with-us in Jesus Christ. 'Have this mind among you' does not mean 'each of you individually have the mind of Christ' so much as 'reflect the being and will of Christ in your life as a community'. So the Church is itself part of that mystery, reflected both in its origin (called before the foundation of the world) and in its destiny (to be one even as Jesus and the Father are one). Mysterious also is its scope. The Letter to the Ephesians cites the call and response of the Gentiles, and thus their becoming part of the people of God, as both mystery and eschatological sign that the promise of the last days is being fulfilled. And this, I have come increasingly to recognize, should be the fundamental purpose of the ecumenical movement in which I have been involved for almost as long as I have been serious about the Christian faith. The purpose is not only to enable the churches to get along better, but to be an eschatological sign, to embody by anticipation that unity which God purposes for the whole creation.

Now in so far as this endeavour involves dialogue between the churches, recognizing the difference between problem and mystery seems to me crucial. Take the dispute between Wesleyans and Calvinists over universal saving grace versus predestination. Each of these two doctrines, which have been set against one another for most of the Church's history, is an attempt to solve the problem of how God saves and whom. The argument goes something like this: if it is the case that not all are saved, and that we are saved, not because any can *deserve* it but simply because of God's grace, then who are the saved?

'The elect whom God chooses before time to receive the saving grace' was the answer Calvin endorsed. 'No,' goes the answer Wesley opted for, 'God gives saving grace to all, but only some choose to accept it, and these are the saved.'

But both of these solutions raise problems of their own which their protagonists acknowledge to be insoluble, not only in fact but also in principle. Why does God elect these and not those? Calvin cannot answer that without denying *God's* sovereign freedom. Why do these choose faith and not those? Wesley cannot answer that without undermining *human* freedom. And that these intractable problems remain points to the fundamental mystery that underlies both, the mystery of God's gracious will to save. Commenting on this, the Methodist/Reformed international dialogue maintains, 'Both traditions have gone wrong when they have claimed to know too much about this mystery of God's electing grace and of human response'.

That general point, that different traditions have gone wrong when they have claimed to know too much about the mystery, can be made about many doctrinal disputes which keep, or are used to keep, our churches apart, not least Catholic–Protestant disagreements about the nature of Christ's real presence at the eucharist. This is as profound a mystery as God's self-giving in Christ from which it derives. How then can we allow it to be turned into a problem, different solutions to which then keep us apart at the Lord's table? Maybe at this point Marcel is right after all, that to degrade the mystery into a problem is a 'vicious procedure'.

I realize, of course, that there is more to this dispute than that, including how and where apostolic ministry is exercised and focused. I happen to think that there is a problem–mystery confusion in most disputes about apostolic succession as well, but there is no space to go into that here. So let me conclude with this sad irony. I teach in a united faculty of theology which includes ministers, priests and candidates for ordination of the Anglican Church, the Society of Jesus and the Uniting Church in Australia. Given my respect for the discipline of the Roman Catholic Church, the only time I have felt it appropriate to receive bread and wine at a Roman Catholic eucharist within that context has been at a requiem mass, once some years ago for a student, and more recently for Jesuit colleagues. But Wesley would have seen beyond the irony to the mystery it points to:

> Love like death has all destroyed,
> Rendered all distinctions void;
> Names and sects and parties fall,
> Thou, O Christ, art all in all.

NOTES

[1] A. Louth, *Discerning the mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983).
[2] G. Marcel, *The mystery of being* (London: Harwell, 1950).

[3] *Ibid.*, vol 1, p 211.
[4] G. Bornkamm, article '*Mysterion*' in Kittel, vol 4, p 818.
[5] *The mystery of being*, vol 1, p 5.
[6] G. Dix, cited in Louth, *Discerning the mystery*, p 16.
[7] *Hymns and psalms: a Methodist and ecumenical hymn book* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1983), p vii.