

“WHO HAS SPOKEN THROUGH THE PROPHETS”

PNEUMATOLOGY FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Paper delivered to the Westcott House seminar in Public Theology, 7th February 2008

It's a great privilege to be able to reflect with you on this most vital of tasks: doing theology in and for a changing world. My initial instinct, as a Systematic Theologian, was to reach for the article of doctrine that seemed most fruitful as a starting point. Given the task of doing theology in the midst of a bewildered crowd¹, I reached immediately for pneumatology, seeing the Spirit's works of interpretation, communication, and relationship as vital foundations for the enterprise. But systematics necessarily gathers from as wide a field as it can, and, in that Spirit, moves through the connections it finds, so I have found myself in the second half of this paper moving into more distinctly Christological territory.

This paper takes note of aspects of the current life of the Anglican church; it is being delivered by an Anglican in an Anglican theological college, at the beginning of Lent with Candlemas just over its shoulder, and is written against the background of the writer's own view of his priesthood in the Anglican church and how it might, God willing, eventually be modelled. As a piece of theology, it reflects all of those things; however, it is first and foremost a part of the reflective practice of that community of the gospel that calls itself “Church”, and it aims with the gospel community to see to the speaking of the gospel. The gospel which the Church speaks is itself a dialogue, “a communication occurring in fact in human history”², and as such is narrated through its contingent and particular details. As such, theology is always both contextual and public – always *occurring in human history*, and always *a communication*. I take as read what I perceive to be our particular position in human history and seek to make some comments about the character our communication might take on as a result; I pray that in doing so, I am in some small way serving the gospel and the Church that bears it. This observation suggests that “public theology” so identified must be something more or other than the self-interpretation of the community of the gospel: it must be aware that its history and the communication it tries to make are sometimes in conflict with one another; that the imperfections of our communication and self-interpretation are sometimes vicious; that the gospel news is not received as good by all, and yet is still the gospel for all and must be communicated as such. Already, in identifying “public

¹ Acts 2:6

² Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* vol. 1, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1997, p. 11

theology”, we have “moved far into the theological circle”³. Such a naming cannot be prolegomenal: it is not the gate through which we pass on our way, but rather the hearth at the heart of the household in which we dwell.

Coming, as you have just seen that I do, out of a theological school suspicious of any qualification placed on the scope and nature of theology, I struggled for some time even for this tenuous grip on what “public theology” might be. But “what” turned out to be the wrong question: I should have been asking “where”, because public theology is out in the world, connecting the contemporary world with God⁴, guiding the world into truth and declaring to the world what is Christ’s.⁵ Such a task requires a robust pneumatology because it is both prophetic – calling God’s people to turn again to Him – and Pentecostal – interpreting God’s love and, as the hymn has it, interpreted by love. Indeed, I want to suggest that pneumatology can both help us to avoid succumbing to some risks in the public practice of theology, and can begin to suggest some useful ways of thinking about theology’s public rôle.

As well as those works of enlivening, bringing into relationship, interpretation, and discernment just mentioned, the New Testament witnesses to the Spirit as the one who knows and reveals God (John 16 above; 1 Cor 2), so that we know God as we receive and share His Spirit. For Paul Tillich, whom we will consider in more detail later on, this sharing was more an ecstatic than a mutual experience: we are “grasped by something ultimate and unconditional”, and so “driven into a successful self-transcendence”.⁶ Yet the starting-point for our understanding of spirit is as we see it within ourselves and as we notice it “actualized in morality, culture, and religion”⁷. We come to know the spirit that is in us first, and only then come to understand that God is Spirit, calling us beyond ourselves and, indeed, grasping us in a movement of self-transcendence. In order to be faithful witnesses to the Gospel, actualizing it in morality, culture, and religion, we need to begin from our own Spirit-enabled faith, and to work with the Spirit in going beyond ourselves and making God known in the world. In order to tackle the sort of tasks we that might face us as we do public theology, we will have recourse to the Spirit so that we might be enabled to actualize the Gospel to those gathered in the public square.

Picking up a newspaper, or perhaps sitting in an R.E. lesson in school, we may note the close association in much of the theology done for public consumption

³ *ibid.*, p. 12

⁴ Rather than “connecting God to the contemporary world”, as John Atherton has it.

⁵ John 16:13&14

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* vol. III, James Nisbet, Welwyn Garden City 1964, p.119

⁷ *ibid.*, p.118

between religion and ethics, almost as if they were coterminous. The BBC Radio 4 website puts religion and ethics together in exactly the way it does news and current affairs (and also comedy and quizzes, but that's a different matter!). It's as if, like Fish 'n' Chips or Morecombe 'n' Wise, they're really just one thing, and of no real public interest or significance when apart. So, when the newspaper columnists attack Rome's position on contraception, for example, they do so on the ethical grounds that it leads to overpopulation and exacerbates the transmission of HIV. True as these things may be, they miss the theological point, so while they may pacify the column's readers, the arguments never hit their purported target. Given that the Roman position is not so much about sexual morality as about recognising who is the Lord of Life, a theological critique might instead question, say, the teachings' basis in natural theology, pointing out that brute biological facts do not reveal theological truths. (I could make a related point about the non-theological tone of the current points of tension in the Anglican Communion – debates which seem to bear the marks of both Pelagianism and Donatism.)

Public theology, to remain true to the radical gospel of the incarnation, will have to involve a degree of public indecency and scandal. Our nervousness about having theological debates in public may rightly be motivated by a concern to avoid seeming even less relevant than the public already thinks we are (or at least, than we think the public thinks we are). But in seeking to avoid irrelevance, we risk collapsing the gospel to a kind of ethical monotheism which may have mass appeal, but which misses the red meat of the gospel and ultimately circumvents the communication of that gospel to the world. The other familiar manifestation of the Gospel in the public square is on a soap-box, and this seems to go too far the other way: arguments, whether theological or not, and whether understood or not, will never be the means by which the Church can attract people to Christ and plant His gospel in their hearts. A robust pneumatology ought to reassure us that we will be given both the words to speak and the faith to speak them – or, indeed, the work to do and the inspiration to do it – and that, in openness to discernment, we will be heard speaking in the native language of each hearer.

“[T]he holy and the secular belong to each other.”⁸ In making this assertion, Paul Tillich is observing that the work of the Spirit in making God known in history implies the convergence of the “holy” and “secular” realms, which are not ultimately distinct. In fact, the holy depends on the secular to correct its tendency to claim exclusive rights to God; and ultimately the secular tends towards the holy

⁸ Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology vol. III, James Nisbet, Welwyn Garden City 1964, p.263

because “[i]t cannot resist indefinitely the [spiritual] function of self-transcendence, which is present in every life”⁹. We see that, for Tillich, the instinct to transcend oneself is fundamental. If this is the case, then the task of public theology is to give content and direction to that impulse, so that instinct can become intentional action. Yet Tillich warns against wanting to fill the secular with holiness¹⁰, expecting instead that the secular, precisely by standing on its own ground, will somehow form a synthesis with the holy. This is because religion and culture belong to each other.¹¹ Each must use the tools and mechanisms of the other to be what it is, and they fall into contradiction if they try to separate themselves, because they are culturally bound together. We’ve become accustomed to celebrating those traces of the Christian story, those glimpses of the Kingdom that we notice in secular culture, and to take their presence as a sign of the deep truth and embeddedness of the gospel in our culture. But Tillich reminds us that our culture is just as much embedded in our expressions of the Gospel, so we should also be aware of those aspects of the secular which have formed and continue to shape the church and its religious practices: “religion cannot express itself even in a meaningful silence without culture, from which it takes all forms of meaningful expression.”¹² On one hand, this is encouraging to the practitioner of public theology, since it confirms that the conversation is between family members rather than total strangers, and what is more, is already in full flow. On the other hand, it is a profound challenge, since it implies that we might find ourselves putting the same cultural tools to service in ways that make sharing them impossible.

I’m deeply sympathetic to Tillich’s project of holding together spirit and culture, and seeing religion as the cultural expression of the church. For our present purposes, his insight is encouraging, and enables us to approach public theology with confidence and self-awareness. My concern is that he achieves his aim by underplaying the claims of theological culture to hold some unique content: his own central idea that faith has its starting point in our instinct to transcend ourselves risks placing humankind too high in the panoply. In holding the Holy and the Secular so close to one another, he encourages the Church to be aware of its dependence on the world, but at the expense of God’s otherness and freedom. Perhaps another conclusion from Tillich’s claims might be that theology itself needs to re-claim its cultural tokens, and to recall that the genuine locus of encounter

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p,264

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

between the Holy and the Secular is God himself, not only in Spirit but in flesh, blood, and bone; God “in [the] torn condition in which we who face death appear”¹³.

We have moved well into the territory of Christology, and, hopeful of finding a way through the tensions we’ve noticed, I’d like to suggest a more aesthetic approach to public theology. Karl Barth famously worked at his desk under a copy of the central front panel of Matthias Grünewald’s altarpiece, made for the Antonin monastery at Isenheim in modern-day Alsace. I see the altarpiece as a painted “mission statement” – in the best sense of the phrase – for the monks who prayed before it, and for their patients (mostly suffering from ergotism, a syndrome of gastro-intestinal dysfunction, convulsions, hallucinations, and gangrene, all caused by the alkaloids produced by fungal contamination in grain). The altarpiece places its viewer in the context of the whole of salvation history, identified with Christ in his agony and transfigured in His resurrection, under the loving care of those who tended the dying Jesus and caught up in their astonished joy, watched by the saints who have borne the gospel to us and sought the Kingdom we now seek. Yet the figure in the theologian’s sights, Barth felt, must first and foremost be that of John the Baptist standing at the foot of the cross, pointing to Christ and saying, “He must increase, but I must decrease”¹⁴. The theologian’s task is, as he put it, to be the long and bony finger of John the Baptist, pointing to the Crucified.

Do I hold out Barth as an archetype for public theology? Like you, my first thought in answer to this question was a response to the density and length of his Church Dogmatics, but then I remembered a little volume that I read each Advent, of articles Barth wrote for the German newspapers at Christmas between 1926 and 1933. Each article re-tells the wonder of the Christmas story from a different perspective, drawing out its meaning for the reader in Munich or Berlin between the wars. As the book’s preface notes,

[t]hese articles have a definite “*Sitz im Leben*” of the German nation during a period when the country went from the apparent prosperity and comparative peace of the mid-twenties rapidly through a period of depression, unemployment, and threatening civil war to its surrender before Nazi dictatorship. However, the message conveyed here is for all times and for all nations.¹⁵

¹³ Karl Barth, Christmas, Oliver & Boyd, London 1959, p.12

¹⁴ John 3:30

¹⁵ Karl Barth, Christmas, Oliver & Boyd, London 1959, p.5

Barth himself wrote, introducing the collected articles in 1934, “one can still say all these things [...] positively, peacefully, and joyfully”. Knowing what we know at our own point in history, this unwavering Christian hope pierces our hearts. Now, those articles are really no different in theme and hope from the Church Dogmatics: the refrain is the same, that revelation is primary, and it is the revelation of the God who cannot be known except as He makes Himself known, who is absolutely free and yet binds himself in love to creation, and who does so not in act or word only, but in person. And that this is the decisive fact of human history and culture.

Theology, if it is indeed to be the Baptist’s bony finger, is constantly trying to turn attention away from itself to its subject, and sits uneasily with those aspects of public discourse whose goal is to draw attention to themselves. You may remember Tony Blair’s “Big Conversation” – an initiative to encourage voters to express their views on questions of public policy, initiated by Mr Blair’s public acknowledgement that his government had made mistakes – or you may not! Shortly after its launch, Roy Hattersley wrote that the consultation initiative was praiseworthy for its openness to criticism, but ultimately a “confidence trick” that came not out of altruism but out of political necessity. This was a discourse intended to point towards its initiator, and to perpetuate itself as a tool for prolonging the government’s hold on power. If it did point beyond itself (and the critics quickly agreed that it didn’t ever intend to), that was coincidental. This “market research” model of public discourse is common, but theology must be in public conversation in a different way, since its truth is not susceptible to public opinion!

I could have chosen any number of examples from all sorts and spheres of public discourse, but I chose this one mostly because of the imagery Hattersley used to praise Blair’s openness: “[i]t is a sign of grace, both a confession of sin and a penance by which forgiveness may be obtained.”¹⁶ “Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them”¹⁷, we might rejoin, and there’s a fine line to tread here if we are to do public theology. In practising our piety before others, we ought not to do so in order that we might be seen, but to pay attention to the spirit that is within us in order that our practice mediates, interprets, and points to the Spirit that gives life and the knowledge of God. Hattersley’s choice of imagery confirms that the church’s language is not a completely foreign tongue, even if it is no longer so widely read. But might it also suggest that only public forgiveness has any meaning these days; that “the public” is a god looked to for judgement? Public

¹⁶ Roy Hattersley, “A Confidence Trick In A Good Cause”, *The Guardian*, 1st December 2003

¹⁷ Matthew 6:1

theology, then, cannot stand over against the world (except as a practice that looks the world in the eye when they are conversing), since, to return to Tillich, it recognises itself as a culture among cultures, “and not the answer to the questions implied in culture.”¹⁸ But it must be prepared to bring culture face-to-face with the questions it poses to itself.

The observations that the practice of theology points away from itself, and that theology is a culture among cultures, sit rather uncomfortably in my mind: I’d love theology to be not only the Queen of the Sciences, but President and Chief Executive Officer as well, able to direct politics, ethics, economics, art, and education from first principals. But that kind of absolute theocracy puts an end to theology, because – in doctrinal terms – it collapses the distance between Creator and creature that allows each to be itself and that opens the space for revelation and loving response; it forces out the Holy Spirit; and in our own lives, it collapses dialogue. Theocracy is as dangerous as secularism. I do want to add something to Tillich’s claim that theology done in public must see itself as a culture among cultures, and that is to say that we do believe ours is the culture that will be vindicated. He may not really disagree on this point, although the closest he seems to come to it is to say that “the spiritual Presence works towards the self-transcendence of culture”.¹⁹ Ours is an eschatological perspective, and that both sets it apart from other cultures and places it necessarily right in their midst, as we will see in a moment.

Let us return, then, to that mission statement in oil on wood that kept even Karl Barth in his place – and in doing so, we will find ourselves once again moving into more Christological territory. As I prepared this paper, I struggled for a meaningful and positive comparison between public theology and some other aspect of public life. Theology is *sui generis*, I have suggested, not like any other discourse, because its matter is the God who is *a se*, who has His being from Himself; its subject and its object are not distinct. Theology cannot discover anything that is not already revealed; theologians do not interpret that revelation apart from the Spirit, do not create understanding apart from the Spirit, and do not arrive at conclusions, so much as at doxologies²⁰. Public theology starts to feel a bit like public art, then: something to be encountered by surprise in the marketplace or by the highway, or perhaps something passed daily, of no more note than the station clock, yet just as much a familiar part of our surroundings. Art seeks to remind us that truth is not

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* vol. III, James Nisbet, Welwyn Garden City 1964, p.261

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ I’m grateful to Dr Douglas Knight for this insight.

the same as fact, and that the world of the imagination is truth bearing – often even more so than the world of objects.

This invitation to take part in some deeper truth is so far highly theological, but we will be aware that in suggesting a correlation between theology and art, we come immediately upon the question of Icons. If we seek to be or to represent (rather than merely to explain) the truth, are we not idolatrously attempting to repeat what God has already perfectly accomplished? Recalling Maximus the Confessor, John Zizioulas argues that the tension between theology and history is at its clearest in iconoclasm, because the debate turns on where we believe the decisive source of truth to be.²¹ Does it come from the past, or is it yet to come in the (eschatological) future? If truth is understood on Platonic lines, shows Zizioulas, then it is always a matter of *αναμνησις*, a re-connection with something antecedent. But, to recall Barth's Christmas theme once more, the Christian view must be incarnational, since in Jesus Christ, the first and the last and the living one, the end of history and the consummation of our truth – and of God's – breaks into the middle of history and stands at our hearth. Athanasius called the Son "the icon of the Father": an incarnational approach takes truth to be future-oriented, so that it becomes "not merely possible, but quite unavoidable, to understand truth in the manner of an eikon."²² What is more, this truth is not something external that we are to take on board, but as seen through the icon it is found already within us as we are enabled to interact with the "end' of history from within its unfolding."²³

There's a piece of public art on the south bank of the Thames that always melts my defences and draws me in. It's called "Look At The World From A Different Angle", and consists of a cast concrete platform just wide enough to stand on, and a backrest about six feet high. The whole structure faces across the river to the City, and leans back about fifteen degrees: I always hop up, settle in, and accept the invitation, now noticing spires and seagulls instead of suits and shoes. Public theology ought to offer the same invitation, enabling people to see their world differently and so to see themselves differently; leaving Kingdom images lying around for people to find, tread on, try on, pass on; and offering a glimpse of heaven to those who pass by. It's a risky approach, of course: we might be ignored, misunderstood, even vandalized – we might be treated as outcasts, lunatics, criminals.

²¹ John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, St Vladimir Seminary Press, Crestwood 1997, pp.99 - 101

²² *ibid*, p.99

²³ *ibid*, p.101

I don't advocate abandoning thoughtful reflection and explanation altogether: I'd be putting most of us out of a job if I did! But, to return to Tillich, the explanatory task of theology comes only after awareness of "ultimate concern".²⁴ In Anselmian terms, the understanding we seek comes only after the Spirit-given grace of faith, and is enabled only by that faith and that Spirit. We have established that even to consider where theology begins is already to be in the midst of theology, and perhaps this parallels the path of faith. Perhaps even to seek is already to believe, and the task of public theology is to look at the situations of public life and to offer up the way that we see them as an icon; an opening for grace. Then, and only then, when we trust that our interlocutors share the same spirit that is in us, will it be possible and desirable to engage together in explanation, without fear of misunderstanding – or at least, without fear of more misunderstanding than our fallenness makes inevitable.

If we seek to do theology publicly, let us pray that the Spirit, who has spoken through the prophets, will speak also through us, taking those cultural tokens of meaning on which all our talk depends, and transforming them by faith to betoken a truth beyond themselves. Let us recognise that interpretation and explanation are secondary to awareness and experience, so that we can offer public icons through which all may gaze. And let us continue to be a Christ-like Church, not only teaching, but also offering signs and stories that enable the world to glimpse the Kingdom and be transformed by that glimpse. I have already suggested that all theology ends in doxology, and at our doxology we are brought to a Candlemas theme. When we do public theology, we are following our calling as the Church to do the work of Christ in the world: to be a light to lighten the nations. Let this work be in the power of the Spirit, as Christ's body, to make known Jesus Christ who is in the Father, and shines as the light of the world.

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²⁴ Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology vol. III, James Nisbet, Welwyn Garden City 1964, pp.235ff