A Short Reflection on a Decade of Weakness

I’m being more introspective than normal, but strangely, I feel I need to mark the day.

Ten years ago today I ran my brain into the ground. I had a “break-down.”

Some people don’t like that negative imagery. They would rather speak of a “break-through” or something more positive. But let’s not hide the reality; I broke my brain. It came from my own lack of wisdom, my unresolved insecurities and unhealthy drives, which collided with a complex and conflicted context. I used up all my fuel, and then some. I came to a crashing reverting-to-childlikeness traumatised halt.

In the immediate aftermath was much grace from my church, much strength from my wife and family, and much affection and support from my friends. I was helped to a road to recovery.

I have learned to be open about my experience, mostly on the off-chance that someone reading this is going through the same. I know how useful it is to know that you’re not the only one to fall off that path. As a grumpy old churchwarden remarked to me on my way back to being functional, with a knowing wry look of an old bloke who’s just seen a welp grow up a bit: “So, you’re not as strong as you thought you were, Will.”

No, I’m not. That was the painful thing to learn. It was the most blessed thing to grasp.

Ten years later, I am well. Well, well enough. Like an old sporting injury, it'll trigger a twinge every now and then. But the lesson remains.

Ten years and one day ago I thought I was strong. I put my shoulder under every burden. I didn't realise that there comes a point when you're not mustering your strength, you're cashing it in… and spending it.

My strength was my weakness. I was achieving outcomes according to my capacity and my skill. It wasn't nothing; I had some game. But it maxed out at the size of me. It wasn't that impressive.

Over these last ten years, I can see where the real fruit has been; the stuff that lasts, the real stuff that lingers. The sorts of things which makes you give thanks to God and trust that he's true. It's when you see lives turned around, and people baptised, and find in brothers and sisters in missional arms a fellowship that lingers across years and latitudes. It's that sort of stuff that lasts, and it's not generated by my strength.

I used to think I could exercise force of persuasion; now I know that the real stuff happens by the the Spirit touching hearts.
I used to think I could exercise strong directive leadership; now I know that the real stuff happens when good people find themselves together under the apostolic heart of Jesus.
I used to think I could, and should, fix everything and everyone I see; now I know that the real stuff happens when I wait on the Lord.

This isn't passivism or even nihilism. It's still about being present. It's still about being familiar with sufferings. There's still a need for conviction and passion and purpose and excitement. But that only works when it rests on peace. And peace comes not from my feeble strength, but knowing I am

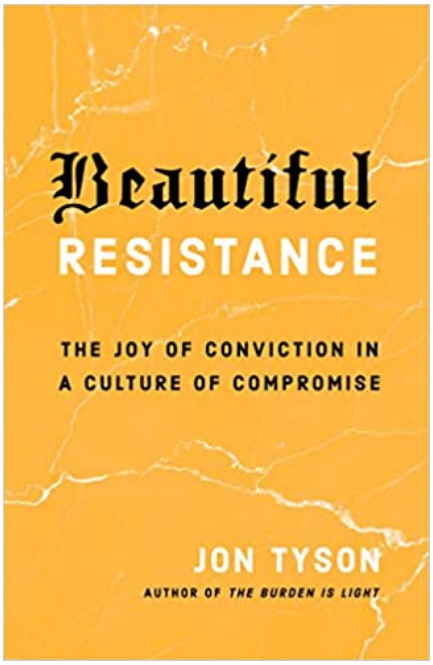
weak, and held by very strong hands.

In short: Jesus, all for Jesus, all about Jesus, all to Jesus, I surrender.

It has been a decade of weakness, beyond anything I ever asked, or imagined.

Thanks be to God.

Review: Beautiful Resistance – The Joy of Conviction in a Culture of Compromise



There's a few ways into Jon Tyson's Beautiful Resistance. Here's one way:

We've been encountering, for a while now, the phenomenon of committed Christians who are "done with Church." This isn't the cliche of people backsliding from faith, it's more vocational than that: We were a generation that encountered Jesus and pursued the gospel and his Kingdom. Many of us did

this; we gave ourselves to the institutions, submitted, learned, did our bit, and some of us were even "successful." Inevitably, however, comes the time of deconstruction. Church and gospel collide. We have that moment when we look towards Jesus and the path of discipleship and we realise that we are looking *away* from his people, and not towards them. At that point there is a crisis. We weigh up whether to throw in the ecclesial towel or not, *because* of our love and hope, not against it.

This book speaks to our generation.

> *For the better part of two decades, I have had a complex relationship with the institution called the church. Jesus called her a bride, one of my atheist friends called her a wench, and I have experienced her as both… I am also grieved by my failures and personal contribution to the staining of her reputation. (Pages 9-10)*

> *I'm sure that you have felt the same desire to escape the drama of the church in our modern life of faith. At night you probably have deep questions about whether staying involved is worth it. Worth the misunderstanding, worth the heartache, worth the credibility hits, worth the sacrifice. And I am sure that some around you have come to the conclusion that it is not. They have wavered and shrunk back, preferring spirituality over religion, and given up on the institution known as the church. Maybe you are reading this at a time when you are struggling to see the point of the church when she is stained by so much compromise. Maybe you would like to retreat to that easier place of spirituality without religion. But I'm guessing that deep down in your heart you actually long for more. (Page 166)*

Here's another way in:

Our generation has struggled to find its native leaders. We have leaned back into older faces: the likes of Packer,

Wright, Stott, Willard, and Chalke (depending on where you see your home). Those are good giants with good shoulders, but the road to our own voice has been complicated.

Our voice fledged twenty years ago or so. Remember the battle of the "Mars Hills"? We had Rob Bell who drew us in with Nooma but sold out and faded out with Oprah and insipid universalism. We had Mark Driscoll who drew us in with keeping it real and relevant and somewhat M-rated, but who badgered us like the bully on the school bus and ran headlong into his own belligerence. The leadership of our generation, sitting at the pivot point between the Boomers and the Millenials and beyond, needed to grow up.

I think we're beginning to find those maturer voices now. The sort of voices with a couple of more decades in them that have been through some wastelands. I'm thinking of people like John Mark Comer and Pete Greig and others of similar ilk (nominate your own in the comments). These voices speak fluent postmodern – truth is to be *experienced* not just *thought* – but have avoided the naivete of intersectional deconstruction. They speak to formation, and not the reductionism of getting numbers onto pews, or into heaven. They are beginning to hit the balance between winsome relevance and being prophetically distinct. Jon Tyson is one of these voices.

It might be confirmation bias on my part, though! Like me, Tyson is Australian. Like me, he is called as a missionary to the Western world. Like me, he has left his hemisphere and set up camp in a foreign land. He's been a lot more successful than me, but good on him; unlike other ex-pat Aussies, it doesn't seem to have gone to his head.

This book is Tyson's significant contribution to a spirituality of mission that takes the context of the Western church seriously. It hits the sweet spot between pastoral call to individuals, and apostolic call to churches to live out and pursue the truth of the gospel. He makes us ponder if "Christ

or culture will have the ascendancy in our generation" (p1).

The *resistance* Tyson speaks of, is therefore *responsive* to *who* we are as God's people and *where* we are in this broken world. He frames the whole book with an anecdote from Bonhoeffer countering the power of Nazi Germany with the "beautiful resistance" of humble discipleship. In the same light Tyson ponders about "*our* cultural moment and the compromise rampant in our day" (p4). The chapters he leads us into summarises what follows:

> *Worship Must Resist Idolatry*
> *Rest Must Resist Exhaustion*
> *Hunger Must Resist Apathy*
> *Hospitality Must Resist Fear*
> *Honor Must Resist Contempt*
> *Love Must Resist Hate*
> *Sacrifice Must Resist Privilege*
> *Celebration Must Resist Cynicism*

The chapter on **worship** recognises that our Western world has no "reference point for idolatry" (p24) and therefore offers no guidance for our desires and passions. The unresistant church adopts the same passions as the world, and we end up with a "church more informed by… cultural preferences than [God's] Word" (p33). Tyson's exploration of this issues touches my centrist heart; his ability to identify and counter the idolatry of both left and right extremes is admirable. He has the cultural insight of a missionary; he has had to come to grips with the "ecosystem of power and approval" in his context of New York similarly to how I've has to wrestle with a sense of the English middle class. Tyson envisages the beautiful resistance:

> *The church exists as a counterformative community to confront our idolatry. So we don't go to church for entertainment. No, what we're really working for here is transformation into the*

image of Jesus. (Page 38)

The chapter on **rest** speaks to how we "ache for peace in the world, but many of our lifestyles are a form of violence to ourselves and those we love" (p46). There are many people speaking right now about the weariness and pressure and distraction of contemporary life. Tyson takes us to the difference between mere "relaxing" and true "rest" which comes with a movement "from fear to trust… from anxiety to peace.. from control to surrender" (p54).

We need a framework of Sabbath that makes Jesus's invitation to rest a reality in our lives. (Page 51)

The chapter on **hunger** is about "confronting our spiritual numbness" (p64). This is a topic that should be talked about more in church circles! The age-old conundrum for anyone pursuing mission is this: How can we get people to simply *care* more? We pursue techniques and programs, and we have forgotten that it is, in the end, a *spiritual* task. Tyson's advice is to "begin again with fasting" – literal, physical fasting – as a resistance to the stultifying culture that wraps everything around what we feel, and what we want (p71). It's a worthy thought; "we have tried every other type of solution… "this kind" will come out only through prayer and fasting" (p75).

I urge you – let your hunger resist your apathy. (Page 77)

The chapter on **hospitality** addresses a culture of *fear*. This book, although dated as 2020, was written pre-pandemic and before the death of George Floyd; the relevance of it has only increased. Tyson explores the process of exclusion (p82), again with admirable centrism that sees the fear-centre of both the progressives and the conservatives. He allows the scandal of an inclusion, exclusively centred on Jesus: "…hospitality wasn't one of Jesus's strategies; it was

the strategy… Jesus was able to model what our culture is craving – spaces of welcome where strangers, enemies, outsiders, and others can become our friends (pp86-87).

> *Jesus created pockets of love in a culture of fear that formed a new kind of community in the world, something he called "the church." The church was to exist not as a haven from the world but as a place of hope for the world. (Page 87)*

The chapter on **honour** is in the same vein. It recognises the complexity of shame and dysfunction within Western cultural contexts: "the elderly are dismissed, traditions are mocked, the past is erased, hopelessness settles in, prejudice is assumed, and conflict is inevitable" (p110). This is the cultural minefield set before anyone who seeks to engage in community life. In answer, Tyson takes us to Jesus' "filter of honor for all he encountered… regardless of the contempt their culture showed them, he saw differently" (p105).

> *I can't help but imagine the power and beauty of a community that saw everyone through an honor filter. What would happen if every person's story, calling, sacrifice, gifts, and future were held in view? If people were seen as crowned with glory and coheirs with Christ? I believe conflict would be transformed, young people would be filled with vision, the elderly would be respected, teh marginalized would be empowered, adn the invisible would be seen… This community would be unlike any other – this community would be like the kingdom of heaven on earth. (Page 109)*

The chapter on **love** takes us to the countercultural sense of *agapé*, or "enemy love." It resists hate, but not in the sense of current rhetoric where "hate" and "love" are weaponised in the culture wars. Rather, Tyson would have us follow Jesus into these societal battlegrounds, with surrendering love: "The arena can be transformed again. But only if we're ready

to act on our faith" (p122). There is suffering in this type of beautiful resistance.

> *Our enemies hurt us. Our enemies abuse us. Our enemies do violence to us. This can cause horrific trauma and require deep healing, boundaries, and grief. Jesus, however, experienced all this suffering and still insisted on love. (Page 126)*

The chapter on **sacrifice** counters the prevalence of unseen privilege. His exploration is both *honest* and *gracious;* he recognises the reality of privilege, but avoids language which *shames* in response. Toxic privilege is rooted in fear, the answer is humility and grace. "We can serve without fear because the kingdom is a gift, not something we earn. From that position of security, we can humble ourselves without any anxiety" (p137). We are shaped by the mind of Christ in Philippians 2; where we have privilege, we give it away. "Servanthood resists privilege, and the kingdom takes root" (p141).

> *Jesus redefined greateness as the distribution of our unearned cultural advantage on behalf of others. Rather than fighting over rights and responsibilities, Jesus calls us to redirect our privilege for others. (Page 139)*

And finally, the chapter on **celebration** is a resistance to *cynicism*. The sentiment of pointlessness is pervasive in our community, and our churches. I certainly encounter it, not just in myself, but in a younger generation; what have we bequeathed? They are launching from the nest into a cloud streaked with GFC, climate crisis, and pandemic. The answer is not pesudo-idealism, the "telling of positive anecdotes that will makes us feel better" (p144). The answer is hope, in the service of a "joyful God" in which we put our confidence, including confidence in his truth (p150).

> *Jesus insisted that the work of God demands celebration. He is in the world, bringing good news, welcoming the outsider, restoring the lost, binding up the broken. The question is, Will we join the feast or issue excuses? (Page 155)*

Throughout it all, there is a common thread. This book is a work of *applied ecclesiology*. **This is a book about how to be the church,** without guile.

I found it fanning some lingering embers back into flame. The Church *is still* the temple of God, a place for his presence (p13). The Church *is still* the body of Christ, existing to express God on earth (p18). Indeed, "there is a rumour going around the West that, in spit of the avalanche of change and often-repeated accusation of irrelevance, a church has actually survived. Yes she is stained; yes, she is broken; but she is here. Her Lord is working within her. The bride is becoming beautiful; his presence is becoming tangible; the body is becoming functional. Beauty is rising and resisting the brokenness" (p20).

Tyson prays "Lord, bring your body to life" (p20), and I remember praying the same thing years ago, in the sweet land of immature zeal. Now, in the present, wedged between ecclesiastical nihilism on one side and triumphalism on the other, I, for one, need to re-voice those old and true prayers, from lips now tempered with struggle and salted with sweat and tears. Tyson is a brother to me at this point, giving me some words to use, and thoughts to think.

I read this book while on a recent holiday. During this we visited the Holy Island in Northumberland and chanced upon Cuthbert's island, just off-shore, accessible only at low-tide. In its day, it was a place of solitude, a place of prayer, a place of spiritual travail. You could feel it in the rocks.

I don't know much about Cuthbert. But I know he prayed there, at and soon after a time of collision in the British church between the Roman body and the Celtic spirit. Cuthbert invested himself at the Lindisfarne Priory as the Irish monks retreated, and answered the call to a spiritual travail for the soul of nation and church.

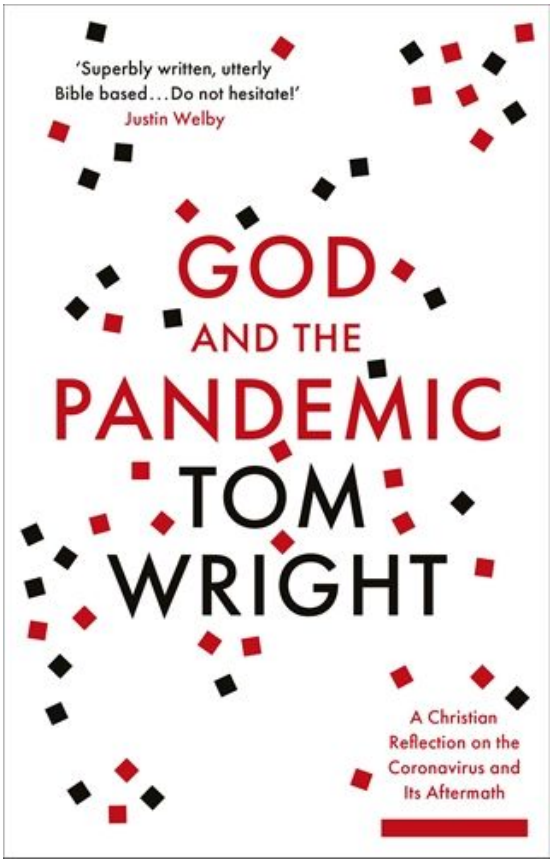
We found ourselves praying there, reflecting on the collisions we see in church, world, and between the two. It was something of a vocational recommitment for me. Tyson's words were in my reflections and I realised I had found something anthemic in them. It isn't complicated. It's just that we need to be God's people.

It is time.

We are God's people, we are disciples of Jesus. Within this broken, loved world, it is our time for beautiful resistance.

Review: God And The Pandemic

The Christian faith is *relevant.* At least, it's meant to be.



We have, of course, skewed our definition of "relevant" to mean something like "trendy, hip, and attractive to young people." Relevance is actually deeper than that. It is about being connected, responsive, and impactful with respect to the real moment. 2020 is a very real moment.

In the midst of the pandemic the relevance of following Jesus has been (understandably) questioned. The doors of Christian churches have been shut, our liturgical and summer festivals halted. The rites and rituals for births, marriages, and deaths, have been cancelled, postponed, or severely curtailed. What are we left with?

Some have given a utilitarian defense: We have kept foodbanks open. We have provided meals, and pastoral care networks. We have coordinated volunteers, and generally been facilitators of decent folk. It's true. But others have done that too.

Some have slipped into seize-the-moment optimism: We have expanded our horizons. We've gone online. We're more accessible then ever before. Our viewer numbers are bigger

than our former congregations. This is great. We have responded well. But so have others. What makes this distinctively *Christian*?

Real relevance happens at the level of our core message and way of life. For us, it is all about Jesus. If Jesus is relevant, then Jesus makes *sense*, and Jesus makes *sense of life*. This is the essense of the Scriptures; the Bible is not some abstract articulation of doctrine, it is *applied* belief which grows from the intervention of God in real times and places. As people devoted to Jesus, our words and actions are meant to be similarly connected, responsive, and impactful. Frankly, we should have something to *say*.

Many have said things poorly. Leaving aside the ridiculousness of prosperity preachers naming and claiming immunity and right-wing political conservatives anathematising face-masks, even the estimable John Lennox has asked *Where is God in a coronavirus world?* but doesn't do much more than reiterate his defense against New Atheism. Relevance isn't just about seizing a new opportunity to say the same things in the same ways, it's about showing how the same truths are alive enough to connect with, respond to, and impact a new set of circumstances; the gospel is not defeated by shifts in context.

Tom Wright's *God and the Pandemic*, is relevant, properly relevant.

It's short, it's easy to read, and it's substantial. It is simple. Five chapters: Introduction to the context, followed by relevant expositions of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, and a conclusion asking "where do we go from here?"

And it is not trite. In fact, the essence of Wright's message is to push back at our propensity for platitudes. To read the signs of the times isn't about digging in to the moment to

find some hidden “inner cosmic moral mechanism” (p17), as if 2020 locates us on the end-times roadmap for those who are privy to a plan. It’s about locating *ourselves* within the revealed heart of God and the divine narrative of his history.

Necessarily, that centres us on Jesus. “The minute we find ourselves looking at the world around us and jumping to conclusions about God and what he might be doing, *but without looking carefully at Jesus*, we are in serious danger of forcing through an ‘interpretation’ which might look attractive… but which actually screens Jesus out of the picture.” (pp19-20). “If there is one God, and if he has come in the person of his own son to unveil his rescuing purposes for the world, then there can be no other signs, no other warning events, to compare with this one” (p22). “Jesus is already reigning”, he assures us, his “rule over this world” is a *present* one, “starting with his resurrection and ending when he has finished the work of subduing all ‘enemies’ – the last of which is death itself, a very relevant consideration at this time (1 Corin. 15.25-26)” (p24).

> *If you want to know what it means to talk about God being ‘in charge of’ the world, or being ‘in control’, or being ‘sovereign’, then Jesus himself instructs you to rethink the notion of ‘kingdom’, ‘control’ and ‘sovereignty’ themselves, around his death on the cross. (Page 25)*

Wright reaches into the Scriptures and shows how Jesus is *presently present.* That is relevance. He is neither located in the past with dusty words of lore, or waiting in the future with fantastical notions of shallow victory. Jesus is present, ruling, reigning, working, within the broken plagued world.

The demonstration and inauguration of that ruling, reigning work is the cross. And therefore the victory, the hope, the renewal, and all the other things we’re looking for in this present moment, is also found there. Pointing to the episode

of Lazarus' death, Wright reminds us how the King brings the Kingdom of God: "He just weeps. And then – *with the authority born of that mixture of tears and trust* – he commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb" (p28, emphasis mine). How much more the authority revealed in the pain of Gethsemane? How much more the authority revealed at Calvary? Christ's power is the form of authority that is made strongest in weakness, and which we discover by *sharing* in the suffering of Christ as we (relevantly!) engage with this world.

The clearest call from Wright, then, in this season, is to *lament*. We weep, we mourn, and we respond as the Holy Spirit empowers us within that helplessness. Isn't that the sort of kingdom that Jesus envisages, inherited by the meek and those who mourn and those who are poor in spirit (crf. the beatitudes)? Isn't that a conceivable *embrace* of the current moment?

> *…God does send thunderbolts – human ones. He sends in the poor in Spirit, the meek, the mourners, the peacemakers, the hunger-for-justice people. They are the way God wants to act in his world…. They will use their initiative; they will see where the real needs are and go to o meet them. They will weep at the tombs of their friends. At the tombs of their enemies. Soem of them will get hurt. Some may be killed. That is the story of Acts, all through. There will be problems, punishments, setbacks, shipwrecks, but God's purposes will come through. These people, prayerful, humble, faithful, will be the answer, not to the question Why? But to the question What? What needs to be done here? Who is most at risk? How can we help? Who shall we send? God works in all things with and through those who love him. (Pages 34-35)*

Wright's book, therefore, has a prophetic edge. A lot of our church energy has gone into shoring ourselves up, battening down the hatches. We are either fearful or comfortable with respect to how disturbed our church meetings and finances are.

But those things are irrelevant. We are not about re-spinning our strength for the "new normal", we are to be moved by lament in the gift of the present time.

We *groan* with all creation, Paul tells us in Romans, as we long for the completion of it all. This is a revelation in *our* Scriptures, the word of the Lord to *us.* Can we not proclaim to this world, by giving voice to this groan? Do we not know the deep joy of meeting the Spirit of adoption, the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of Jesus, who also groans within us? A happy dapper brave face will just reveal ourselves. But if we groan with his Spirit, we don't just have some sort of chance of experiencing an awareness of Jesus, we find ourselves being sent in the same way he was sent, sharing in his authority, following his commission. "We hold the vision and the reality side by side as we groan wih the groaning of all creation, as as the Spirit gorans within us so that the new creation may come to birth" (p74).

This, then, is also a *vocational* book. If there is any utilitarian potential in this pandemic it is this: that it may catalyse the church to remember itself, by remembering Jesus and the raw, almost primal nature of his kingdom. The tears of the King are the pathway to a new creation and Wright calls us to it.

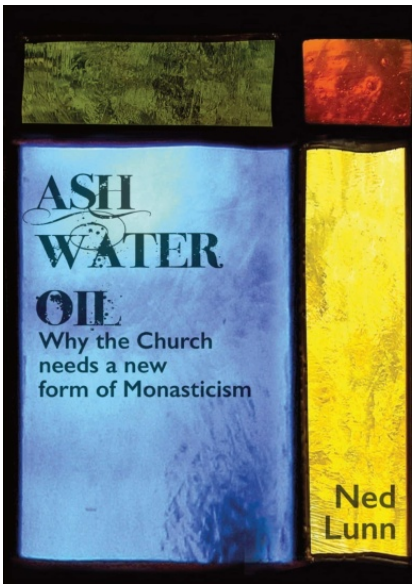
> ***The followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain.*** *(Page 42)*

Wright does unpack some of the outworking of it all. He dips into how Christians have turned their groans into actions in the past, willing to care where the state has not, and so showing how God's kingdom is different to the world. He cautions against the privatising of worship through the prolonged pivot to online services. He warns of following the "secularising lead" – "The sign of the new creation, from the ministry of Jesus forward, has been the healing presence of

Jesus himself, and his death and resurrection above all" (p69). There is a necessary place for public worship, public help, public speech as a way to express God's Kingdom. The world is destabilised, and the "pagan subtexts" (p 72) of our secularised situation will play out in a fight between the gods of money, health, and deadening pleasure.

These are not unprecedented times. But this is a season that is forcing us to be honest. This is the case for the Western world particularly, and the Western church as well. Wright's book helps express that honesty, and perhaps some repentance. If nothing else, it helps us groan well.

Review: Ash Water Oil: Why the Church needs a new form of Monasticism



A common experience of being involved in church life is a *collision*, between vision and aspiration, and the hard reality of what church is actually like. It can come as some sort of crisis (e.g. being on the wrong end of hypocrisy or abuse) or simply a nagging sense that something is "off," an "I don't think we're being who we're called to be."

I mention this, not because this is the primary topic of Ned Lunn's, *Ash Water Oil*, but because those who have had that

experience may find particular solace and even inspiration in its pages.

You see, the collision I speak of is not necessarily a bad thing. I often find it in the clash between the joyous *ecclesiological* reality of church (the Spirit-filled, Jesus-led, worshipful people of God seeking to make disciples of all nations) and the *ecclesiastical* reality (institutions filled with politics, anachronisms, and corruptible personalities). I find that the collision exists *within* myself more often than not.

It is a *creative* collision. It's where we wrestle with God to lay hold of his blessing, clarify his promise, and pursue our shared vocation as real people in a real time and place. It is where we move past faith and church as mere expressions of the pleasure principle, and lay hold of what being a Jesus-shaped community is all about.

For that creative task, *Ash Water Oil*, is an excellent resource. It is the work of an author who clearly *loves* the church, and he has used his significant intellect and passion to lay out a vision of what might be.

Lunn draws upon "monasticism" as his defining guide, in both its ancient and newer forms.

We are used to examining monasticism through the lens of avowed "poverty, chastity, and obedience." We understand these words but they are somewhat inaccessible to the life of the ordinary church. Lunn's distillate is much more helpful. He prefers the principles of "stability, conversion, and obedience." This is what he explores, carrying them across the liturgical lessons of Ash Wednesday, Easter, and Pentecost (hence "Ash, Water, Oil"), and a matrix of trinitarian themes ("Creation, Redemption, Sanctification") and practices ("Prayer, Study, Service").

> *What I want to propose… is a set of virtues to seek to*

> *inhabit… I wonder what would emerge if we acknowledged together, a sense that the New Monastic call is, like our brothers and sisters of the religious life, a commitment to 'stability, conversion and obedience'. To explicitly seek to live a life rooted somewhere or with someone no matter what the spiritual weather is like, no matter what temptations afflict you. To respond to the call to stay and remain faithful. [i.e. 'Stability'] Secondly, to continually engage in the work of personal change; to turn away, step by step, from the things of this world to the Kingdom of God; to intentionally become, in different circumstances and in different ways, more and more Christ-like, poor and dependent on God. [i.e. 'Conversion'] And, thirdly, to desire to place yourself the decisions of something or someone else; to curb that deeply human temptation to be in control of ourselves and our decisions; to hold onto the power of our own lives. [i.e. 'Obedience'] (Pages 12-13, [with my annotations])*

For Gill and I, this resonates at the creative collision point. When we think of ourselves and our church (both local and wide), it explains our frustration. We are so often fickle and fleeting, comfort-driven, and not *stable;* we are so often self-secure, sin-denying, and grace-defying, and un*converted*; we are so often individualistic, consumeristic, and voyeuristic, and dis*obedient* to the way of Christ and *unaccountable* to each other. The monastic path expresses a counter-cultural path, in the best sense of it. The Church *needs* a new form of monasticism.

At the beginning, in **creation**, the monastic way reminds us that we are but dust. It speaks to our fundamental identity.

> *We are not, despite the depth in which we feel it, the main part in our story… Without Him above us we become drunk on our own achievements as a species. We begin to tell ourselves that we can do anything, be anything, form the world into our own dreams and fantasies; we are the main protagonists and*

> *will drive the story. To remind ourselves of our creation, of our createdness, is to place ourselves into the right role in the true story and the story begins with some earth. (Page 35)*

> *We are called to embed ourselves solely in the reality of the love of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and taught to us through the lives of the saints, which provokes us to see ourselves and others not as different in gender, sexuality, race or class but as equal under the authority of God. We are to receive our identity in Him and Him alone. In this way we no longer need to fear abandonment or rejection of others because our roots are entwined with the one who gives us life and brings us to our true self. (Page 59)*

The image of the monastic life speaks of a sense of *devotedness*, of having one's entire self set apart for divine purposes. If there is an opposite descriptor, it is of the "secular" life. There is a creative collision when the church *secularises* even as we maintain a religious aesthetic. There is invariably a rub point focused on identity and autonomy. On whose terms do I live my life? On whose terms do we manifest our shared identity as church? Control collides with childlikeness. Self-definition collides with the numbering of the hairs of our head. Life as a self-made construct collides with life received as gift.

The way through it is to to rediscover our createdness. We need to know this truly religious path.

In **redemption** we remember we are Christ's. We belong to him now, and this is *life* to us.

> *In his grace, He lifts us out of our world of transaction, karma and Fate, washes us and places us back in the garden of His delight. He can, if we allow Him, birth us anew through the water of baptism. He begins, from the moment we see the Father in His Son, Jesus, shaping the dirt and mud of our*

> *lives into new life. He recalibrates our journeys (page 98)*
>
> *If we are called to continual conversion into the likeness of Christ, then we should follow Him into His rich life of kenosis and empty ourselves so that others may become rich by God's grace. Our conversion is an emptying of that which we possess and which possesses us. (page 104)*

I have come to say in recent years that my church growth strategy can be boiled down to one principle: those who seek to save their own life will lose it. The creative collision is real, particularly in my evangelical world, where we tend to default back to mechanistic approaches to strengthening and empowering our organsiations at the expense of worship, mortification, and more mystical devotion. At one point Lunn confronts the narrative in which we "must secure our inner identity", and make "our autonomy… a thing to be protected and sustained. The life of poverty and kenosis, however, demands that we follow Christ in dying to self in order that we can be raised with Him in new life" (page 105). It includes acquiesence to the "shared narrative" of Scripture that "gives shape to our interpretation of existence" and without which "we are forced to make up our own narrative and return to the masks that hide us from truly knowing ourselves." (page 127).

> *Whilst we, as God's people, continue to focus on our own survival, perpetuating our own, albeit noble and good activities and arguments, we fail to witness to the power of grace…. God does come and meet us where we are, but He comes to turn us around, to recalibrate us and for our whole lives to be changed.(Page 113).*

Finally in **sanctification,** we remember we are called to be *moved* towards him.

> *A sacred community is one that is defined, not by an exoskeleton, a cast around a limb, but, rather, an*

> *endoskeleton; a form around which we gather. Sanctification, the redefinition of our being, occurs when we are in pure communion with the divine source of holiness and true life. (page 155)*

That imitation of Jesus, of course, is where we have creative collisions, it is the painful process of *becoming*.

A pertinent case in Lunn's consideration is the question of leadership in the church. As ministers of the gospel, we want to serve as Jesus did, and *lead* as he did. We want to give ourselves, and receive others as he has received. We want to live in the knowledge of his *power*. All of this gets expressed within community dynamics, including the necessities of hierarchy and the exercise of authority, and it often goes wrong. No wonder the monastics had to wrestle with the concept of *obedience* in their walk of holiness.

Gill and I have observed a tendency to resolve this process by a form of avoidance: A falling back of how we see leadership, not into some form of accountability in community, but into a form of nihilism that renders anything other than the unboundaried inclusion as inherently violent and abusive. Leadership is anathema, not aspiration. Community is merely the gathering of individuals, because personhood will inevitably collide with any sense of moving together; it is best to keep the collective impotent and stationary and allow each one their own self-adventure. In the end, such a mode denies that Christ is present in our (often flawed, but very real) ways of being, and would rather embrace a painless vacuum in which the Body of Christ is close to meaningless.

> *I would argue that, for a society to function, authority must remain external to the self. Narcisissistic tribalism is not a healthy way to exist but there are elements of it that should be encouraged; togetherness, sociality, loyalty… (page 164)*

> *There is a generalized view that 'millenials', the generation who grew up straddling the millennium, have no respect for authority. In reality I think we do respect authority, but we do not acknowledge them, as an acknowledgement of them would insist that we were not totally independent and 'free'. These more subtle authorities hold sway over their subjects and coerce an unconscious obedience from them. They maintain this power by continuing to challenge the very idea of authority which they freely exert on people in order that any alternative that challenges their influence can be undermined swiftly and easily. This leads to the dangerous tendency to dismiss clear, transparent authority whilst allowing deceptive and sycophantic forms to hold power over us. (page 160-161)*

> *And there it is: the mantra for the Church at the present time. No one can tell anyone what is right or wrong. All must be accepted and placed as equally authoritative and by so doing authority is displaced and no longer shared. (Page 163)*

The alternative monastic vision of leadership is more worthy. Gill and I have attempted to encapsulate it as "church as family." The focus is on person rather than program, discipleship shaped by devotion to God. We echo Soul Survivor's Mike Pilavachi who has spoken of a desire to "raise up sons and daughters" rather than "hire and fire employees." We have become aware of the critiques, e.g. the dangers of heavy shepherding and the avoidance of objective accountability. But this is exactly the value of looking to the long traditions; they can assist and enable the life-giving modes of leadership to be pursued healthily. When, for instance, Lunn desires for bishops to learn the ways of the abbot, he's calling them to a vocation with a substantial legacy of knowing what it is to be both released and bounded by the way of Christ.

> *"It is within this captialist context that leaders have begun*

> *to be more obedient to plans, initiatives and strategies than to people. It is after this shift that we being to experience the degradation and humiliation that comes with abuse of power. We become pawns in a game rather than treasured companions in a journey. St. Benedict wants the abbot to model his leadership on Christ who, as we saw… was 'self-determined and self-limited' (page 168)*

In conclusion, I agree with Lunn, the Church needs a new form of monasticism. The more Gill and I read, the more we realise that this is why we answered the call so many years ago. If we are to be anything more than cogs in a Western World machinery of self-actualisation, or competitors in the marketplace of feelgoods and flourishing, we need to return to some ancient roads. We need a rediscovery of the way of Christ.

> *Being sent somewhere to to tell our story is easy. Being sent to live a life dependent on God, to be stripped of all our identities, comfort, power and influence; that's mission. We are looking not to interrupt our lives with acts of service but to find that our life with God is a perpetual life of servanthood to God, with God and by God. (page 181)*

> *The Church needs to recapture a vision for a shared life, bound together by a shared narrative, shared principles and shared practices. (page 177)*

We wholeheartedly agree that "this living out of discipleship in a community distinct by its core will draw others towards the Church" (page 180). At the moment, we are wrestling with what this means in practice.

During the pandemic lockdown we have attempted monastic rhythms within our large vicarage household. We have stumbled in our little community as I'm sure many communities have struggled. Yet we are more convinced than ever that a more monastic mode of life is a vital part of bridging the gospel

into upcoming generations. In the midst of our experiment, Lunn's book is a resource as it gives words to the questions we were asking, but not voicing: As our context turned us inwards into introspection, we were encouraged to realise that "…as we seek a theological framework for the sustainable life of community, we must start with our shared, a-contextual story" (Page 57). We remembered to worship. Surrounded by the expectation to do and perform, we became grounded in the monastic balance of "the prayerful and devoted… and the more overtly missional, serving mendicant" (page 62).

As we come out of pandemic into the season ahead, we ponder, with Lunn, a crucial question: "Could an Anglican parish church reate and adopt a Rule of Life? I, myself, have asked the same question and came to the conclusion: no" (page 200) His answer looks to the incompatibility of statutory responsibilities and the devoted way of life.

I think I agree. In the pandemic lockdown, much of the parochial responsibilities were suspended, and we could operate more monastically. Now we are coming back out, the creative collisions resurface. An Anglican parish, as an *ecclesiastical* unit, is barely fit for purpose as an expression of *ecclesiological* reality. Yet it can, I think, offer a place of harmony: A village around the monastery, the community around the community, intertwined, served and blessed.

The collisions will continue. But so will the creativity.

Thoughts and Talks for Being

God’s People at Home: Eucharisteo

The latest in our video series on being God’s people at home is now available:

Video Series: Being God’s People At Home

God is leading us and calling us in this strange season. It’s an opportunity to invest in a mode of being his people that draws us closer to him, stimulates our call, and increases our delight in the leadership of Jesus. This immediate time will shape us and serve us as we go into what is ahead.

Gill and I and others in our household have been putting together some thoughts and talks about how we might respond. In particular, how we might grow in the reality that we are currently expressing as “church in our homes” and while our homes are the location of God’s church. In our homes, households, and “telehouseholds” we minister to one another, and draw closer to God.

Two videos have been uploaded, we’ll be releasing more over the next little while from time to time.

Video 1: Introduction

Video 2: Lectio Divina: Being immersed in God’s word

Q&A: How do you distinguish between your feelings and what God is saying?

Anonymous asks (in response to a teaching time from one of our recent livestreams):

How would you distinguish between the words in your head and what God is saying?

I'm sure the Bible says not to act in feelings but if it's a feeling God is giving you how can you know it's from him?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

I really appreciate this question. It's an honest question. I think many of us ask (and answer it) without noticing, particularly when we are uncomfortable. It's when we find ourselves *confronted* by or *disagreeing* with something we read in the Bible, for instance, that these questions arise: What is wrong here? What doesn't sit right with me? Why doesn't it sit right? How do I wrestle with it?

Too often, rather than wrestle with it, we put the niggly thing aside so that we can simply feel comfortable again. It

is rarely the best way forward.

So how might we explore your question?

Firstly, let's look at things in general:

Your question is what we call an *epistemological* question. *Epistemology* is how we think about *knowing* stuff, particularly how we know what is right and what is wrong.

It the words in my head say something is true, is that enough or do I need something else? If it *feels* right, does that make it right? That's the sort of thing we're talking about here.

Our answer is affected by historical and cultural differences:

- Some cultures emphasise *tradition* as more important than individual feelings or realisations. If you *feel* something is wrong, but the cultural tradition says it's right, then the individual gives way to the collective wisdom. The internal process is like this: "I recognise that my experience is limited. Our tradition reflects the shared experience of generations of people, and is therefore less limited. Besides, I want to continue to fit in, so it is therefore more likely that I am wrong and the tradition is right."
- Some times in history have emphasised *reason* as more important than feelings or individual intuitions. The so-called "Age of Enlightenment" from the 1600's through to the 20th Century picked up on this. "Truth" is determined by logic, and science, and cold hard calculations. This is an aspect of what we call *modernism*.
- In the "post-modern" era (20th Century into the present day) we have elevated the value of individual feelings and thoughts. "Truth is experience" is our catch-cry; if we can't feel it, it is not true. There's value in this.

> Cold, hard, abstract theory, is not enough to guide and shape our lives. Our lives are also full of creativity, mystery, and the delights of the senses. We are also aware that beneath traditions and logical frameworks there are often hidden emotions and prejudices and unspoken power dynamics; we *deconstruct* these so-called truths as the self-serving assertions they actually are. "Going with your gut" rather than arguing yourself into subservience is a virtue in this worldview.

What does this tell us? That the "words in your head" and your "feelings" are not without value, but neither do they solely determine what is true and what is right. I know from my own experience, that my emotions are often broken. For instance, I have had a break down and depression; during that time my feelings about myself did not match the reality about myself and I had to learn to realise that. There have also been plenty of times when I held a view fervently that I subsequently came to realise was *wrong*. It is impossible to learn or grow without agreeing with the possibility that I've got something to learn.

Secondly, how do we approach this from a Christian perspective?

Our faith in God introduces something else into our epistemology. We belive in a God who is not distant and aloof, but is *involved,* not only in the history of the world, but in our lives. We therefore belive in a God who *speaks*, through word and action. What he says is a *revelation;* it reveals truth about who he is, about who we are, and about what this world is like.

So how do we know what that truth is? How do we know what is being revealed? What is God's revelation to us?

The beauty of it is that God's revelation is *objective* and external to us. God's truth doesn't depend on us. This is a

good thing! If it did, our sense of truth and of right and wrong would be self-defined. The truth is that God loves the world, and loves *me,* whether or not I feel it or "know" it. The truth is that there is right and wrong in God's perfect justice, even if my heart has been hardened and my mind has been dulled, and I am either justifying myself or falsely tearing myself down.

This sense of God's revelation is found in two forms:

It is found in what we call "general revelation"; there is truth to be found within creation and from looking at what is in front of us. "The heavens declare the glory of God", the psalmist *says*. "Since the creation of the world", Paul *says,* "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." This is how Christian belief embraces and recognises the value of the scineces; it is a study of creation and of humanity that reveals much truth.

It is also found in what we call "special revelation." That is, if God is close, and interacts with his creation, then God reveals himself in *history*. The written accounts of that history will then also reveal him. From looking at that written history we also see how God speaks through *inspiration*. He *speaks* to his people. Sometimes (but not often, it usually freaks people out), this is a direct "voice from heaven" (Exodus 20:18-19, Matthew 17:5). Often it is through the inspiration of a *prophet* who is set apart by God to speak to the people on God's behalf. It is also through the giving of the Law, and in the inspiration of songs and poetry. The Bible is full of these things: history, law, prophetic writings, wisdom and creative writings, the accounts of Jesus' life, and letters from his followers.

When we say "The Bible says" what we mean is that "God has revealed himself, in history, saying." God has even spoken about how he speaks. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is

useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:216). The Bible is therefore an *authoritative objective revelation* for us.

The beauty of it is also that God's revelation is *subjective* and personal to us. God isn't relegated to speak to us in dry and dusty texts with dogmatic formulae; he whispers deeply and personally into the deepest parts of our heart. He calls us by name. He *knows* us. Jesus revealed himself to others in this way. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate and Counsellor. Sometimes the whispers in my head are prompts by the Spirit of Jesus. Sometimes my feelings are the way in which God is waking me up to his truth, a light in the darkness around me.

So how , then, do we *know*?

We can be certain of something when it all lines up and there is agreement in our epistemology. When our own feelings and logical thoughts agree with the traditions around us… when those things line up with what we read in the Bible and how we feel the Spirit is speaking deeply into our souls… then all is well and good. We have a sense of being *sure*.

When there is disagreement between these epistemological sources, however, we have some wrestling to do.

In particular, when I find myself wrestling with a part of the Bible that doesn't "sit well" with me, I churn it over.

1. **I look to myself.** What I'm trying to do is to work out what is happening within me. I name up the feeling: Am I feeling angry, guilty, annoyed, fired up and frustrated? What's going on in me? Are those feelings associated with experiences in my life that I haven't resolved yet; is there some pain and trauma that is getting poked? **How is this Scripture offending me or moving me?** I don't pass judgement and soothe the feeling, I consider myself and work out what the problem is. I recognise that my

heart is often fickle, I don't quickly agree with it, but I acknowledge the reality of my feelings.

2. **I apply some reason and look to logic and tradition**. Am I reading this part of Scripture correctly? Do I actually understand what is being said? Have I properly got into the world of those who first read it, and understood what they were hearing? Have I shoved my situation into the text and reacted to something that was never intended in the first place? How have other people understood it over the years? How have they applied it? What can I learn from them?
3. **In all this, I pray for the Holy Spirit to help me.** I ask for the Spirit to *illuminate* my wrestle – to give me insight into the Scripture, or an insight into myself. I trust that the Lord has something for me in the revelation of himself. Sometimes I've had a sense of words "jumping out at me" from the page, or stuck in my mind while I dwell on them. Sometimes the Spirit of God works through these things. But! Just because I feel it, doesn't mean that it's the Spirit at work. In particular, the **personal revelation of God to my spirit will never be at odds with his objective truth** in Scripture.
4. **I do it in community**. I share all this wrestling with others, even it's just one person like my wife or a friend. I explain to them what I'm feeling, and how that's colliding with the words in the Bible. We pray together. We reflect on it together. We wrestle together. And sometimes there's a prophetic word within that community that sheds light and makes things clear.
5. **I allow God to be God.** In the end, I entrust myself to God. It's nice to have our feelings resolved, and to be comfortable with the Bible and God's word, but it's not always the way that leads to growth. Sometimes God is drawing us deeper, and we need to give it time. **I can avoid the pain of that growth by setting God's word aside** by either judging it to be wrong, or subjectifying

> it as irrelevant to me. But, if I want to grow, I need to allow the wrestle to remain. I fall back in confidence on the things that are sure – e.g. God's love and truth and the beaty of Jesus – and trust God with the rest. Even, and especially, when we cannot see, we acknowledge our blindness, and reach out for God even more.

I hope that answers the question. How we wrestle with our feelings and our own understandings is key to our discipleship and our caring for one another. Thanks for asking. Hope these thoughts help.

Delight and Defence of The UK Blessing

If you're anywhere within 200ft of a Christian's social media you will have encountered this youtube video. Musicians and worship leaders from a number of churches across the UK, singing "The Blessing" over the nation.

The video is here in case you've missed it: The UK Blessing on youtube.

Let me be clear from the outset here: I *delight* in this song and how it's being used. This post isn't a substantial critique. It's a bit of wondering, a bit of defence, a bit of leaning off from it to think about the times we're in and the

church of which we are a part. The song itself (attributed in the main to Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes) came into the limelight coincidentally with the Covid-19 pandemic. We've sung it ourselves as a household in this strange season.

So here goes: I **delight** in this song.

I delight in the content of the song. Its main motif draws upon the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:22-27:

> *The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:*
> *'"'The Lord bless you*
> *and keep you;*
> *the Lord make his face shine on you*
> *and be gracious to you;*
> *the Lord turn his face towards you*
> *and give you peace.'"*

These are deep and rich words that Scripture leans on from time to time to give assurance of God's love and favour. It's there again in Psalm 67, for instance. It's not about individualistic blessing: the focus is on *nation* and *generations.* This also has rich grounding (Exodus 20:6, Deuteronomy 7:9) as does the invocation of God's *presence* (e.g. Joshua 1:9) and God being *for* his people. These deep waters well up in the New Testament (e.g. Romans 8:31) as declarations of how fundamentally, totally, existentially, substantially, utterly, profoundly is the blessing of God to be found in Jesus of Nazareth, died and risen again as Lord and Saviour!

Notice how a lot of this biblical grounding is from the formative days of God's people, Israel, in the time of their rescue from slavery in Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and the entering into the promised land. These were not easy roads. There were afflictions from around them, and the afflictions of sin and wayward hearts within them.

Sometimes it may seem like the loving heart of God looks like discipline (some of us are feeling that at the moment) and feels like his absence (ditto): but the deeper truth remains and calls the heart to trust him. He is for you. He is with you, to the thousandth generation. May his face look upon you and give you peace. **At this time of affliction,** however we might feel it and experience it, these are life-giving words to sing.

Of course, some may (and have) suggested that the blessing that the Scriptures reserves to God's people shouldn't be invoked over the world at large. The critique is not invalid: the blessing of God is not merely a universally and thinly applied sense of warmth, it is deep and located and especially attached to God's determined work, his promises to his people, and his presence in the person and work of Jesus. But it's not wrong to pray for the blessing of many. I've addressed this question before. I long for all people to know the loving presence and saving grace of God, who knows us and made us and has given us his Son to save us and lead us into an eternal life that begins now. Especially now.

I delight in the recording and release of this song. Having had to come to grips with sermon recording and livestreaming, I can very much delight in the video and audio editing skills!

It's not perfect, of course. I've already seen some comments from those who haven't seen someone who looks like this that or the other; not all the intersectional categories have been covered. I feel it a bit myself; there's a lot of big evangelical charismatic mega-churches in that mix: Where are the "ordinary worshippers" who look more like me and mine? I've got a well-honed cynicism after years in this church game. The "what about me?" response is an understandable human reaction, but in this case I/we should get over it.

This song hasn't come from some tightly planned bureaucratic focus-group vetted process of fine-tuned diversity management.

If there is anyone who has “made it happen” it’s Tim Hughes (formerly of Soul Survivor, and now of Gas Street Church Birmingham) and his espoused attitude towards the song is commendable. It has come about from a loose arrangement of friends and networks and invited and offered contributions. It’s organic and messy, and therefore not perfect. And that’s good.

It also hits a pretty good balance regarding the spotlight and avoiding the sort of brand-driven recognition we often slip into. One of the *points* of this song is to show that the churches are alive and working together. So it needs some sense of being able to recognise people and places and names of congregations. It does a good job of avoiding the celebrity factor. People are not named, *churches* are. It’s been released under a neutral brand. The naming of churches serves the purpose of showing a community of communities without overdriving the brands. And I *love* knowing that there are Eastern Orthodox and Catholics and !Pentecostals and St. Someone’s of Somewhere all in the mix.

For me, unlike other attempts at this sort of thing, this feels like my brothers and sisters, and I can sing with them. I *know* these faces. I have seen quite a few of them in real life. I’ve had conversations with a number of them. There’s at least one face in that mix that I’ve served coffee to across my dining room table. The family of God is both bigger and smaller than we think.

Again, I’m good at cynicism. I’ve seen ego-driven light-show presentations done with not much more than a Christian aesthetic. This is not that. It’s not absolutely pure and precise, but so what? It’s a cracked-jar crumpled-paper offering of people who want to declare the love of God over a hurting nation. It is something to delight in.

The only thing that wears my heart, just a little, is this. There’s not enough of Jesus. One of the cracks in our jar

(that I think this current season is rubbing at, one of the loving disciplines of God for us right now) is that we have been in a rut of church being about church rather than church being about Jesus. The church *is* a blessing – but that's a truth of vocation (what we are called to and enabled to be) rather than identity (what we are by our own right in and of ourselves). The declaration at the end: "Our buildings may be closed… but the church is alive" is great, but it's unfortunate in that it's simply about us. It's the same with the blurb in the video description which is about *our* unity and *our* good works. It's almost there, but not quite. **We are only a blessing because Jesus is. We are only alive, because Jesus is. Let's say that.** We embody the blessing, but Jesus is the substance of it.

We're not singing ourselves over the nation, we are singing the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Keep doing it.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

This Season As Parable – The posture of faith in a corona closed world.

Like many of us, I've been pondering things in this current pandemic season. I'm finding it helpful to see some parallels between these times and the effect of Jesus' teaching, especially his parables.

Allow me to explain myself: Jesus, famously, made use of parables. Rather than "answering plainly" he would tell a short story. We know many of them by name: The Parable of *The Prodigal Son*, *The Lost Sheep*, *The Good Samaritan*, etc. They have become well-known to us. So well-known, in fact, that we have become immune to their *force*.

Parables are meant to *impact.*

Here's an example from someone other than Jesus: In 2 Samuel 12, the prophet Nathan confronts King David about his corruption. He could have spoken plainly, but I doubt he would have been heard. Instead, he tells a parable, the story of a rich man who oppresses his poor neighbour. David is *drawn into* the story until he is confronted: "You are the man!"

Nathan's parable brings David to a *crisis*. He cannot stay where he is. The status quo is not possible anymore. He *must* respond, one way or another. **He can either respond with hardened heart, or he can fall into faith.** In this case David softens his heart and responds with contrition and repentance. The parable has its impact.

When Jesus speaks in parables he brings his hearers to a similar crisis. They cannot remain unmoved. They will either harden themselves against his word, or they will fall into faith.

In Matthew 13:1-9, Jesus shares the famous Parable of the

Sower. It's a beautiful metaphor involving a farmer sowing seed indiscriminately; it lands on shallow soil, weedy soil, hardened soil, and good soil. He later explains the metaphor; the seed is the word of God which can come to nothing in the poor soil of the pleasures and pressures of life, or bear much fruit in the good soil of those who "hear and retain it."

This story prompts his disciples to ask, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?". Jesus responds by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

> *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"*
>
> *And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*
>
> *He said, "Go and tell this people:*
> ***"'Be ever hearing, but never understanding;***
> ***be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'***
> *Make the heart of this people calloused;*
> *make their ears dull*
> *and close their eyes.*
> *Otherwise they might see with their eyes,*
> *hear with their ears,*
> *understand with their hearts,*
> *and turn and be healed."*
>
> *Isaiah 6:9-10*

Isaiah spoke to God's people at a point when they were wallowing in complacency after a period of prosperity, even as their world was threatened by a looming invader. They had lost their way. They had forgotten who they were. They were *God's* people but they had become self-assured, oppressive, and unrighteous, just like the other nations. They didn't just need *teaching*, they needed *impacting*. Like Nathan with David, they needed a real *crisis.* So Isaiah was to speak to them in a way that only faith would grasp. Without that soft heart, they

would be “hearing but never understanding”, confirmed in their hardness.

Jesus speaks in parables to do the same for his generation.

Consider the Parable of the Sower. For those with “ears to hear” with a heart of faith, it is wonderful truth. God’s life-giving word *is* scattered indiscriminately; it’s not just for the strong or wise or holy. God has spoken to everyone, in all places and all circumstances. Heard with a heart of faith, this story generates a yearning to be good soil. It impacts faith and leads to more faith.

But for those who can’t hear it that way, it will have the opposite effect. For those who hold the word of God as something reserved for the upright and pure, a tool for those who have been schooled in the right Pharisaical school, this parable is a confrontation, even an offense. The reponse of the Pharisees to Jesus *was* often condescension, derision, or anger. They heard but didn’t understand. The parable reveals their lack of faith.

When it comes to faith (or the lack of it) within God’s people, parables have a prophetic *amplifying* effect. “Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” (Matthew 13:12)

This then, is my reflection: **This coronavirus season is working like a parable to us**, the church. It is having a similar prophetic amplifying effect. **It is bringing us to a crisis.** It’s not just a crisis of medical and economic management (although that is real). It’s not just a crisis of bereavement and trauma (although that is very very real). It is bringing us to a crisis of faith.

In the westernised world we have chuffed along in our churches in a context of comfort and prosperity. It’s a bit like Isaiah’s day. We have built a religious industry. We have made

our appeals to the masses. We have gotten good at offering something decent on a Sunday, and mechanisms attuned to felt needs throughout the week. But that edifice has been shaken; we cannot even meet together at the moment.

Even as we do our best (and there *is* much good) in the netflix world of livestreams and zoom, we recognise that the former status quo is gone. If we can put 90% of our "product" online, just what were we doing anyway? The question is raised. The moment is impacting us.

The impact is also similar to Isaiah's day; it is raising the question of *identity. Whose* are we? The difference is literally a matter of faith: We are either God's people, and confirmed in that, or we are self-made with a borrowed Christian aesthetic, and that is what will emerge. It's a parabolic moment.

We can imagine the two different responses:

We could do it without God. We *can* rebuild the edifice. We *can* market the spiritual experience. We can even do a decent job of being a neighbourly community on a par with any decent Mutual Aid Group. We can find our activism of choice that wants to put the world back together again a certain way, and get on board. We may even take some of our current moment with us: the comfort of doing church in our pyjamas is not nothing!

It's not necessarily malicious or morally bad, but in this direction it can all be done in our own strength. Like Isaiah's people seeking help from Egypt… like religious leaders dismissing the up-start from Nazareth and turning back to their traditions… we will not hear the call to faith in the current moment. Just put it back the way it was, or the way we now want it to be.

In this direction, the trust is not in God, it's all about us. Extend it out and we imagine not just church, but *divinity itself* in the form that we want it, purged of all that we find

disagreeable. This can manifest at any point on the church spectrum: From woke do-goodery, to blinkered protestations, to marketing tactics, to immovable emptied traditions, it can be sweet, or acidic, stimulating, or soporific. But it has this in common: My world, My terms. A Christian aesthetic, but God not needed, not really.

I can see our current parabolic moment amplifying this faith-less response. Yes, I see it around me, but mostly I mean this with respect to *myself*. I want to *do*. I want to *seize the moment*. I want to *plan the future.* This is *my* time! Let us choose the future that most aligns with our sense of self-security and call that "faithful"!

The real difference isn't about choosing one self-made future as more virtuous than another self-made future. If we look at it like that, we are hearing but not understanding.

Rather, **the other effect of this moment is to *undo* us, and bring us to God.** That is the heart of faith.

We are also seeing this in this moment. People are being undone. They are wondering, seeking, yearning, *thirsting* for something beyond themselves. Perhaps its because we're facing mortality honestly again. Perhaps our pretenses of safety have gone and our simple *smallness* has re-emerged as real. Perhaps life once looked like a rut and rail in a predetermined direction, but now there are *possibliities*. Whatever it is, this moment is undoing us. It is at this moment in the parable that we look up to see the face of Jesus speaking.

Look at the response to Jesus' teaching. Faith often looks like bewilderment. It's the Pharisees that go off with self-assured certaintity of how they want things to be, but the path of faith looks more like confusion. Eyes have been opened, now blinking in the sun, exclaiming both "Lord, at last!" and "Lord, I don't know what to *do!*" The Bible describes this moment in many ways – from *amazement* to being

"cut to the heart" to declarations of bewailing truth *"I am ruined." "Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man."*, and *"My Lord, and my God."*

The faith-filled response is not so much as a position or determined direction, as a *posture.*

> It is a posture of surrender. It is cross-shaped, a laying down of everything. It can feel like a refining *death.* Let it be that it is no longer we that live, but Christ that lives within us! We repent. We believe.
>
> It is a posture of response. Jesus says, "Come, follow me!", and we leave our nets and follow him. We are stripped of our security, and led into the unknown. But it's OK, we are led by Jesus. He is of greatest value.
>
> It's a posture that bows to grace in the suffering. Of weeping when needed, and laughing at other times. Of praying "Lord, your will be done!"
>
> It's a posture that waits for him, as the edifices crumble, and the collapse of more substantial things is more than possible. And it ponders firstly, not "What can *we* make of this?" but "What will our Lord now do?" It is aware of needs, and fears, and griefs, and opportunities, and possibilities; but it doesn't just up and thrust forward. We only do what we see the Father doing. We *wait*.
>
> **Above all, it is a posture of worship.** We remember who we are, and we are *His*. Our distinctive is our worship: before *anything* (even before we all manner of good things, like a loving community), we are Jesus' people. Everything else comes from that, or we lose it all, even our love in the end. So we sit at his feet. We stare at his face. We rest our head against his breast. Our love is in him, bearing his name.

Across the spectrum, it has this in common: Lord, your world.

Lord, your terms. Lead us, in this moment, lead us. It's all about you, Jesus.

This season is like a parable, it is impacting us with a crisis of faith. The status quo is not possible. And there are two responses for the churches: to harden ourselves in self-assurance and build our future, or be softened in faith and be his right now.

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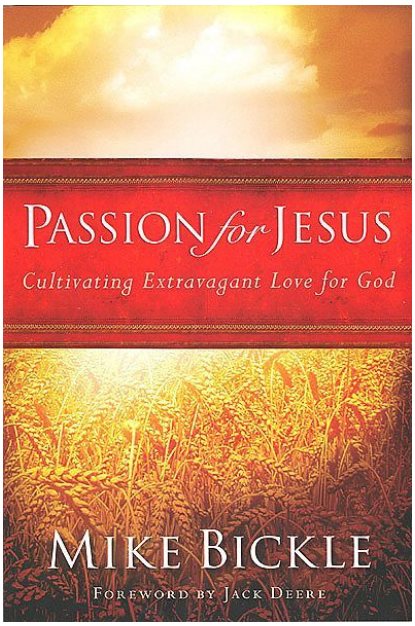
Review: Passion for Jesus – Cultivating Extravagant Love for God



At the core of human identity is what we *desire.* As the saying goes, "What the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies." I think Cranmer said it, and it is true. I know it in myself; when I wrestle with who I *am,* I end up at questions of "What do I really love? What is my heart's desire? What *moves* me at my deepest?"

It's the same with church communities. We can talk about vision-casting and strategic planning and the rest of it, but 99% of the time a church's problems come down to this question

of passion. What *moves* us? What do we *want*? Whom do we *desire?*

To be frank, the honest answer for most churches is that we are enamoured with ourselves: our way of doing things, our past glories, our insecurities, our past pains, our desire to be bigger and stronger. Even when we are going about our worship (which is meant to be, by definition, God-focused), our eyes can drop to ourselves; to our feelings, our power, our benefits of being Christians. There's a fine-line between thanking God for making us worthy, clean, and beautiful as his bride, and staring adoringly into a mirror.

Mike Bickle's *Passion for Jesus* has, for this reason, been a refreshing read. Bickle is the founder of International House of Prayer, Kansas City (IHOPKC), a movement that is arguably the American correlation to the UK's Pete Greig and the *24-7 Prayer Movement*. This book is his definitive, slightly autobiographical, tome, originally released in the 90's and updated a decade or so ago.

Bickle's mission is to move people to pray. His wisdom recognises that that is a thoroughly impossible task if we do not understand the centrality of God in our very identity, or if we misconstrue God and don't see his loving heart. And so he lays before us the truths of what God has revealed to us about himself. It's not just the theological categories of God's *nature*, but the personal categories of God's *character*, his emotions and passions.

> *…passion for Jesus does not come from natural human zeal or enthusiasm. Passion for Jesus comes first and foremost by seeing His passion for us. (Page 4)*

Bickle explores this partly through his own story, and recounts the crises by which he came to reflect on and grasp God's love and affection. His project is to go to **the foundational place of *desire* in our walk with Jesus.** We could

talk about Christian ethics, Christian morals, or the boundaries on the straight and narrow way that should bind our wayward heart. Bickle would rather talk about the beauty, glory, and intimacy of God. Rather than focusing on the edges of the path, he would have our heart be drawn down the road.

Expositions of *intimacy* with God are rarely adequate. Bickle is better than most when he urges us to be *lovers* "fascinated with God's beauty" (page 37). Like others on this topic, he draws on the Song of Songs – that romantic, even erotic, love song-play between King Solomon and the Shullamite girl. He does it reasonably well, despite some exegetical slips (I much prefer David Pawson's exposition of the Song). Nevertheless, Bickle draws some valuable insights, particularly around **the dynamic of *absence* in the growth and expression of desire** (pages 127-128). This is crucial, because the *absence* of God, rather than *intimacy* with God, is what most Christians predominantly *feel*. Yet the Beloved turns that sorrow of absence into *yearning* and *searching* and courageous abandonment of comfort and security because of her *desire*. These are helpful reflections.

In a similar vein, he spends an entire chapter outlining "twelve expressions of God's beauty" (page 132): God's beautiful *light*, his *music*, his *fragrance*, and other unashamedly affective contemplations. It's a fascinating exercise, and has informed the counsels of my own heart when I am praying and dwelling on God in my everyday.

But the reason it all works, and what sets Bickle apart from other writers and speakers in the charismatic and pentecostal scenes, is that **he doesn't forget the *theology.*** It is good, *beautiful*, theology influenced by the likes of Tozer, Piper, Packer, Edwards and "the devotional classics written by the Puritans" (page 171).

This book is nowhere near the slightly Freudian caricature of loving God as a starry-eyed swooning at Jesus and a desiring

to be filled by his powerful Spirit. **Here is an exposition that not only reveals God's love and affection, but his *transcendence* and *sovereignty.*** Bickle warns of how a blindness to God's magnificence is a "shocking disregard for Him" (page 28) and that a dismissal of God's holiness renders the cross of Christ insignificant. "They understand neither the greatness of their need nor the glory of God's gift" (page 32). This is the antidote to the prevailing false gospel of today's church, that we can have God on our terms.

> *When we gaze upon His loveliness, we will gladly die to those things that are not like Him. (page 35)*

I particularly appreciated how Bickle makes use of Jesus' famous prayer in John 17. It's a prayer for *intimacy* ("that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you") and it includes our Lord's specific prayer for *us* ("for those who will believe in me through their message"). Too often this prayer gets turned into pious moralising manipulation: Don't disagree with me, don't you know that Jesus wanted us to be one, you wouldn't want to disappoint him, would you?" Bickle sees the prayer as a manifestation of God's sovereign heart; Jesus has prayed this prayer, as an act of love and affection for his people, and his Father *will* answer it. "The Holy Spirit *will* enable us to experience the deep things of God, as the apostle Paul taught" (page 42, emphasis mine).

> *It takes the power of God to make God known to the human spirit. This knowledge enables us to love God… it takes God to love God, and it takes God to know God… The church <u>will</u> be filled with the knowledge of God. Jesus said it. His promises never fail. The Holy Spirit <u>will</u> use the release of this knowledge to awaken a deep intimacy with Jesus. A revival of the knowledge of God <u>is</u> coming, and as a result the church <u>will</u> be filled with holy passion for Jesus. Divinely imparted passion for Jesus is on the Holy Spirit's agenda as seen in*

> *Jesus' prayer. (Page 60, emphasis mine)*
>
> *I have looked at the lukewarm, compromising church of our day and wondered, How shall these things be? Will such a glorious revival come to pass? Then I remember Israel's negative spiritual condition during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. The church's only hope is that God is rich in mercy. Therefore, at His appointed time, God will supernaturally intervene. The same flaming zeal in the heart of the Father that complelled Him to send Jesus the first time will manifest as He revives the compromising church in this generaiton. The zeal of the Lord of hosts shall perform it. (Page 62)*

This book is not about twanging charismatic heart-strings, it is an eschatologically scoped book, standing awe-struck at the plans and purposes of God. It looks for a "church that is joyfully abandoned to Jesus' lordship" (page 76) as our Lord inherits the nations for his possession (Psalm 2:8).

I went to a concert last night, where Andrew Peterson lifted our hearts and minds towards the things of God. We were *moved*. Ironically, I found myself downcast and dejected. I had been taken to something deep – to the plans and hearts of the Someone who made and bled for this world and for his people. And it had left me feeling lonely. This desire for God is the root and core of who we are. I delight that Gill and I have learned (and are still learning) to orbit it together. And there are many others to stand beside and share the awe. But, in general, I am weary of an unmoved church, especially in the West, consumed in itself and discarding its own on the path to self-preservation or self-engrandisement. I feel the same weariness in Bickle's book, but also hope, and joy, and confidence in Jesus. The gift of that is its value.