

Liberating Church

Rev Dr Neil Richardson, Methodist Minister and
visiting tutor Queens College Birmingham

An Attempt at 'Refreshment through Returning to Sources', (James Dunn)

Many things today conspire to make churches church-centred; our own problems and agendas take up an inordinate amount of our time. To mention just three: re-structuring, fresh expressions and 'contemporary, relevant worship' are all natural, and even necessary, responses to the situation we find ourselves in. But we need to go deeper and wider if our churches are to be, not so much church-centred, as God-centred. A 'God-centred' church may sound a pious, even narrow aspiration, but understood in the light of Christ it will mean, at the very least, a profoundly human community. But if churches are to progress towards being more God-centred and more human, they need to be liberated from themselves. Otherwise, we can hardly be a liberating influence in the wider world. Hence the title is given for this article is 'Liberating Church'.

It's tempting to confine ourselves to church-generated business because, even though there is too much of it, it has the advantage of being identifiable and immediate, whereas we can ignore the bigger, deeper questions we face, or else we can postpone the discussion of them until next week, or even next year. Two of the biggest and most important questions are about God and the Bible. The crisis about God - which we rarely speak of - was expressed as long ago as 1968 by Sebastian Moore, the Benedictine writer, when he said 'What is most lacking today, both in the world and in the Church ... is an adequate concept of God (*God is a New Language*, DLT 1968 p.38). There is an apologetic task here: we need to ask how far the many, often strident criticisms today of the 'traditional' Christian god are valid, and whether, in all sorts of ways, our god has been too small. There is also an urgent evangelical and pastoral task: how may we help each other, and people both inside and outside the Church, to experience the holiness and the beauty of God afresh?

The Biblical crisis today is most graphically expressed in the title of another book published in the 1960s, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Churches*. The Bible itself has become problematic for many people in our churches, and yet, if I am not mistaken, it is supposed to be a source - a primary source - of light, power and liberating truth. The biblical revelation is a transforming revelation. So the mission of Scripture is to form the Church, and that is far more than moral formation. It includes transforming the very consciousness of the Church community.

So I am suggesting that, if we are to find refreshment and renewal today, a necessary step is to re-connect in deeper ways with Scripture. This will help us to re-connect with each other and with God, with life and the wider world, and, not least, with our deepest selves. This is not a 'back to the Bible' call; it

is more a suggestion that the Bible can re-fashion the way we see things, and invite us to step into wider worlds – worlds which are more fully God-centred than our church-centred ones often are. God through God's Word will enlarge our horizons.

First of all, it's instructive to see *what is missing from the New Testament, and what is there instead*. For example, there is no single blueprint for church order or patterns of leadership. But there is important teaching about apostolic leadership. There is no blueprint for church worship either - 'traditional' or 'contemporary'. Instead we glimpse communities whose very life is doxological and eucharistic. Their 'assemblies' (*ecclesiae*) function to 'build up' their common life, so much so that a newcomer to the assembly will be constrained to say 'Surely God is amongst you' (1 Cor. 14.26). So the community itself is a revelation of God. (*Story of congregation which welcomed and held a young man suffering from Tourette's Syndrome*)

Other examples of what is not there in the New Testament, but what is there instead, points in the same direction. Instead of denominations, we have diversity, and aspirations to unity; we have few references to Sunday, but much about the Church as a witness to the Resurrection; no references to church premises as such, but much about *being* a building – i.e. the temple of God etc – an image which points up the vital importance of personal relationships within that community.

But now let's try this exercise in reverse, and ask: *what is in the New Testament, but only marginal, or not fully acknowledged amongst us?* The New Testament, especially in the gospels and in Acts, testifies to 'signs' and 'mighty works'. The word 'sign' can help us avoid a sterile debate about 'miracles'. It suggests that a mark of the Church's life and mission will be those healing, liberating and transforming experiences and events which point to the God who accomplishes them. (*Story of church which a woman who slept in a bin liner in the churchyard began to attend....*)

But there is much more that is prominent in the New Testament, but less obvious amongst us. (I'm not thinking here of debates which were essentially first century debates, such as the Judaizing controversy). For example, the churches of the New Testament are places of conflict and controversy. We may say, 'What's changed? Welcome to the Church!' But look more closely. There are passionate arguments in the pages of the New Testament about boundaries of faith and conduct, about what is the gospel, and what is not the gospel, about when a Christian may accommodate himself to the prevailing culture, and when he may not. *And all this with repeated calls to unity*. By contrast, we talk easily – perhaps too easily – of being an inclusive church; we try to be nice, avoid conflict, suppress our anger, or, when someone does not do so, get embarrassed about it. The arguments we do have, apart from the gay issue, tend not to be about what is and what is not the gospel, but about what the colours of the refurbished church lounge should be, or whether we should buy in the food for the harvest supper, or make it all ourselves.

There are many other themes present in the New Testament, but perhaps marginalized or neglected amongst us : preaching, contemplation and interior prayer, without which 'the Church cannot fulfil its mission to transform and save humankind' (T. Merton), the sharing of economic resources, teaching the faith, prophesying. And perhaps there is one thing, which, though not absent, we are strangely silent about: ecclesial sin (NB Peter and Judas amongst the disciples), and structural sin (NB Paul's use of the singular *hamartia*).

Before we ask ourselves what are the New Testament's dominant themes, let's engage in a slight diversion, and ask *what dominates our church life, but not the pages of the New Testament*. I will resist the temptation to say much about choirs and music...! There are wider, deeper issues, less tangible, but much more important. I find no examples in the New Testament of people doing things for the Church's sake, rather than for God's sake, or the Gospel's sake. There are calls to disciples to persevere, but little or nothing about keeping the church going. Anxiety for the Church – not, of course, at this stage for the insitutional church – is there, but is countered again and again by the command 'Fear not'. And I find no preoccupation with relevance. It might be argued that the possibility of irrelevance never arose as long as the new Christian movement remained within the religious and racial-cultural boundaries of 'Judaism'. But even in a multi-cultural, multi-racial situation which began to emerge with the mission to the Gentiles, the predominant questions are not relevance, but the identity of God and the reality of the resurrection (Acts 17.22-31). We have so far, I think, baulked at talking about making God relevant. But that healthy hesitation should alert us to the impertinence of talk about making worship or the Bible relevant.

There is a third stage in our attempt to 'map out' what is in the New Testament for our own refreshment and renewal: *what are the New Testament's dominant themes?* The first answer has to be eschatology! But it may be more helpful to expand that: God's 'new world' in which the Scriptures have been fulfilled because the Messiah has come and been raised from the dead, the Holy Spirit has been given in new grace and power, and a new worldwide community created whose vocation is to model the very purpose and goal of creation. In short, the New Testament bears witness to the transforming revelation of the Trinitarian God, and all that meant and means for the life of the world.

The 'epicentre' of that revelation was the cross and resurrection of Jesus, out of which the 'Trinitarian' experience of God came. It would be difficult to over-emphasize the importance of this scriptural centre of gravity. The resurrection is not, of course, about Jesus coming back to life, or even just about life after death. It is about God raising the crucified Jesus from the dead into eternal life, with all the revolutionary, life-changing implications of that claim. It means, just to give one example, that the Church has only one thing to 'boast' about, and that is 'the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal.6.14).

What else dominates the pages of the New Testament? One theme cries out for inclusion in any short list: the mission to the Gentiles. What does that tell us? Perhaps this: 'Start with the Church, and the mission will probably get

lost; start with the mission and it is likely that the Church will be found' (J. Hull). This biblical emphasis on 'the nations' and on creation, (the *kosmos*) suggests that today, in a new way, the Bible is at last coming into its own.

What does all this add up to? Clearly we cannot transplant ourselves into another era, or put the clock back to what we mistakenly imagine is a golden age. We do not have the luxury of saying 'If we are to renew the Church, we can't start from here'. But we do need to recall what Scripture is for: to form the Church, and to transform its consciousness. As I suggested earlier, that must include re-connecting with each other and with God, with life and the wider world, and with our deepest selves.

I will say least about re-connecting with each other. We all know it, but it's helpful to recall sometimes the prominence of 'each other' commands in the New Testament: 'love one another', 'bear one another's burdens', encourage one another' and so on. There is only one test of authenticity: 'this is how we know that we have passed from death to life, that we love our brothers and sisters' (1 John 3.14).

What of re-connecting with life and the wider world? A church-centred church is likely to be neither enculturated nor counter-cultural. One reason for this, I believe, is that we exclude much of reality from church life and worship. We not only avoid conflict and suppress anger, (being nice to each other, rather than being real is what counts); we tend not to find enough space to discuss in church worship and fellowship the everyday experience of church members, particularly in their workplace. (Some people, of course, might stop coming to church if we did find the space!)

Yet the calling of the Church in every age is to share the culture around it, and also to stand opposed to it. 'Christians should seek to live at the heart of the world from the centre of the Church'. But a church can easily create a kind of artificial space in which a church culture develops. This culture is not necessarily the same as tradition. A living tradition sustains identity, and ensures that, in dialogue with the past, we move into the future. Church culture is more an amalgam of traditions which have become detached from theology. ('We always have a harvest supper' etc.) .

The New Testament and its revelation of God invites us to re-think the Church's position in the world. We have said for far too long, wrongly imagining that we were echoing the New Testament, 'Christians are in the world but not of it'. We should reverse that epigram; to do so makes, almost literally, a world of difference the Christian is not of this world, but is sent into it. What is entailed in living at the heart of the world from the centre of the church? Here is one suggestion, taken from the Acts of the Apostles. We tend to be misled by the style of Acts; the 'set-piece' speeches (Peter's sermon at Pentecost etc) were a normative feature of history-writing in the Graeco-Roman world. A closer inspection of Luke's text shows that Paul, in particular, engaged in dialogue and discussion. And that must have meant, (despite what our preconceptions of Paul might be!), that the apostle listened

as well as spoke. Listening to, and learning from people different, seriously different from ourselves, is integral to the Church's health and well-being. We tend to imagine that dialogue with people of other faiths is either to win them for Christ (the evangelical agenda) or to discover how much we have in common (the liberal's agenda). In fact, there is a goal even more important than either of those aims, laudable though they both are, and that is to discover the truth.

The Christian starts from the premise that Christ is the truth, but that does not mean that we possess it, but that we long to know, and to love, the One whom we believe to be the truth. One way to do that is to listen to people seriously different from ourselves. And what can be said about people of other faiths can also be said of agnostics, atheists, and, indeed, anyone. How can a church which does not listen carefully to people so different from itself be sufficiently self-critical to be effective in mission and evangelism? Perhaps more churches need to ask themselves 'Why have we not made more disciples?', but to ask that question without resorting to easy excuses such as 'People just aren't interested any more', or 'People have other things to do on Sundays these days...'. Conversations with people very different from ourselves might be channels of the Spirit, and help us to locate ourselves more effectively in contemporary life.

A second suggestion about or context, this time in the light of the New Testament's most political writing, the Apocalypse. (The Apocalypse is too culture-bound to be taken literally, but its scriptural status means that its significance transcends its original context, and therefore we can't ignore it). The suggestion is this: in engaging more incisively in our context as witnessing and truthful disciples of Jesus, we shall need to think more deeply than we normally do about what we might call the 'bear-hug' of liberal democracy and contemporary capitalism. A liberal democracy, of course, is far preferable to an oppressive dictatorship. But one unforeseen consequence of John Locke, the Enlightenment, and the more benign political constitutions which grew up in their wake has been the way in which liberal democracies tend to privatize, to individualize and to relativize religious faith. As for contemporary capitalism, I am not making either a political or an economic point, but merely expressing a concern: to what extent should Christians subscribe to contemporary patterns of buying, consuming and spending? What might Romans 12.1-2 mean in practice? It is not easy, in a tolerant, largely affluent society, to be vigilant and discerning. In short, I am asking whether the New Testament can help us to become a prophetic Church in an age where such a prophetic ministry is desperately needed.

Before I leave this subject, it's important, I think to ask one more 'mapping' question: *what dominates our 21st Century world, and is therefore absent from the New Testament?* There are many things, of course: ethical questions such as embryo research, to which the New Testament gives no direct answer. But both testaments bear witness to the process in which the people of God must be engaged if we are to respond to new questions. That process involves attending to scripture and tradition, listening attentively to each other, to the wider world and to the Spirit, and all this as practising disciples of Jesus.

The Church has always faced new questions, but there is one particular challenge which we face which bids fair to give New Testament apocalyptic

new significance, and that is the crisis of climate change. We could discuss its causes and possible solutions, but the Church's most important task, I submit, is simply to ask: what, in this crisis is the word of the Lord? Whatever it is, it will surely be both a word of judgement and a word of hope. The judgement might be hinted at in a simple equation made in one New Testament letter: idolatry is the desire to have more (Colossians 3.5). The hope lies in the Biblical testimony to a God who, in the Old Testament, never gave up on his people, and who, in the New Testament, can be more clearly seen as the God who loves Gentiles as well as Israel, and will not give up on them either.

To recapitulate the argument so far: the New Testament and its perspectives – often challengingly and refreshingly different from ours - are vital if we are to be liberated from being a church-centred Church to become a God-, Christ- and Spirit-centred Church, and if we are to be a liberating Church, living from that centre at the heart of the world. So, finally, can we and our congregations re-connect with God and with our deepest selves in new and deeper ways? If we are to journey along this road, as we surely must, worship and preaching, prayer and bible study are clearly vital. There are deeper issues in worship than what kind of music, or musical instruments we have, whether we use a screen or whether we do not, how we arrange the chairs, if we have them, or whether we get rid of the pews if we don't. The deepest issues are all to do with God, our relationship with God (and therefore with each other), and how we may experience God in a way which is actually transforming. It is crucial to being a liberated and liberating church.

The presence of anyone in church (including ourselves!) is no guarantee that they/we will worship. There are many reasons for this. People may come preoccupied and unprepared for worship; the service may be unhelpful; people may not hear the Gospel. (And if people do not hear the gospel, how will they be enabled to praise God?) I am not suggesting that these things do not happen, but that, for all sorts of reasons, they may happen intermittently. This brings us to the most fundamental question of all, and the one which has underlain everything I have tried to say here: whether we speak of the ultimate Mystery, or Ultimate Reality, or, in more traditional language, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is this abiding reality who bridges the centuries between the world of the Bible and our own day. The Bible, after all, is God's book, God's word, the record of God's transforming revelation and mission to the world. We need to re-visit the Bible with renewed passion and hunger, crying out for answers to questions like these:

Is God amongst us or is he not? And if God is still amongst us, what is God doing in our midst? What is God calling us to be, to say and to do in this growing global crisis? And how may we be a church less church-centred and more God-centred, so that we can be a liberating force even now in God's world? In attending to questions like these, we can't escape the disturbing prominence of another theme in the New Testament: suffering, and the pressures which disciples would not experience if they were not disciples. The way of revelation is the way of the cross, and no Church can be truly prophetic or liberating without discovering, perhaps in new ways, the pressures which go with discipleship.

Finally, a more personal comment is about re-connecting with our deepest selves. In the first year of my first circuit appointment I had to take some time off through overwork, and I guess most of us battle with diaries which are too

crowded for our own good. The New Testament encourages us to distinguish those pressures we are under which come either from inside ourselves or from other people, and those pressures which simply go with the territory of being a disciple and a presbyter or deacon in the Church of God. About those pressures the New Testament is extraordinarily positive; 'in all these things, we are more than conquerors' (Romans 8.37). But we need to distinguish the pressures which are inseparable from our vocation from those which are not. So I end with part of a letter written by Bernard of Clairvaux:

'How long can you be like a spirit that goes out and never comes home again? How long can you give everyone else your attention – but not give yourself any? Yes, if people treat themselves badly, how can they be good for anyone else? So think on this: give yourself some space. I'm not saying, Do that all the time. I'm not saying, Do it often. But I am saying Keep on doing it, again and again. Be there for yourself, in the same way that you are available to everyone else – or at least be there for yourself when everyone else has gone'. (Quoted in Seeing Christ in Others, ed. Geoffrey Duncan, Canterbury Press 2002, p.184).

This re-connecting with our deepest selves is also a vital part of the project I have called 'Liberating Church'.