

The Gospel and our culture(s)

We are all strangers. It goes with the territory. This is not our home and it never will be. This isn't where we'll stop and settle. Anyone who chooses to follow Christ necessarily moves from place to place: their destination is important, but not as important as how they get there or who they go with. "Journey" is the message of the moment, but a journey with Christ is the message of a lifetime; unlike the journeys that punctuate this post-modern world, this journey has an arrival.

And yet, deep cynicism can occur when the territory around us is either threatening or unfamiliar. Like the Israelites during the Exodus, we can pine for what is past, compare with what is present and criticise everything in sight. Cynicism, though, is never the disease; rather, it is the symptom of something far greater: disbelief that there is actually an arrival. Some take this cynicism – and cloak it with bigotry and thinly veiled arrogance – and exclude those who do not adhere to their conceptions of what they see as their truth.

I see this cynicism in my friends: a distrust, even a compelling dislike, of the Truth of the Gospel in their lives, where a sociologically-influenced distrust of authority has morphed into an inability to see the exciting work of God. They have ensconced themselves in the position of a doubting Thomas that they fail to not only see the risen Christ when he walks in the room, but also fail to experience his Spirit akin to Peter's rooftop vision in Acts 10. To them, the traditions of the church are anachronistic and its unerring truths are unpalatable. In their theology, there is no sin and for some not even a resurrection. When no one is fallen, there is no grace to pick them up; when there seems no need for resurrection, there is no point to hope. They talk

of life's journeys, but omit mention of life's destination.

Departures are a significant feature in anyone's journey – Christ's invocation to "follow me" necessitates departure – but arrivals are equally, if not more, significant. In this journey with Christ, we know that where we are now is not our destination; we're called to place our treasures at the place where we'll arrive; we're presently aware, but future-focused. We're not settling in; we're strangers on the way.

Strangers never belong; but, on Christ's journey, they do believe. And in believing, they act and interact. Some call this interaction "fellowship". As clichéd words go, "fellowship" has taken on a variety of meanings: it now means all things to all people. But it's a difficult word – and, in a world where belonging is more significant than believing – it has the potential to both create and destroy.

True fellowship is inclusive and welcoming: it resonates the stories of the Prodigal Son on the one hand and Zaccheus on the other hand; it invites in the strangers and calls them brother and sister; it takes a haven and turns it into a home.

Destructive fellowship, by contrast, is divisive, fractured and exclusive: it decides who belongs and who does not; it welcomes like and ostracises the unlike; it speaks a language that no-one can understand and assumes a history that excludes newcomers; it takes what could be a welcoming community and turns it into a gated community.

Longing to belong is a sign of this post-modern world: people are displaced physically, emotionally and spiritually; where they once had anchors and foundations, they now have slippery shores and unstable ground. What once were authorities have now lost their

mandate to speak or, if they are speaking, are either being drowned out or dumbed down.

One of the most unwelcome words of this generation is "loneliness". It at once encapsulates and profoundly critiques this longing for belonging. It says, in bold lettering: **I do not belong**. To acknowledge it is to accept a resigned place on the "outer circle", never privy and never welcome to those further "in". This is a place of barren ground and, in the context of a church, a place that no-one should be in. As strangers in this journey, where we belong is amongst those who do not belong, amongst those who – in this world – are strangers too. We are not called to conform; we are called to be transformed; we are also called to be careful what we imitate.

A recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* spoke about the power of imitation in our society: where like attracts like, where fashion follows what others wear, where we surround ourselves with people just like ourselves or try to become like those who surround us. In this "information age", we know more about what our friends are thinking, doing and saying: SMSs, PXTs and emails connect us more readily; not only can we track our friends' thoughts, we can also influence and imitate them. But there is a price, as the HBR article puts it:

Lacking trusted references, human beings are unsure whom to imitate and thus more likely to imitate the wrong people. . . . One of the results of [this] self-reference is the total uncoupling of decisions from fundamentals, a circumstance that produces a hall-of-mirrors effect in which reflections of reflections multiply infinitely, growing ever murkier and more remote from original sources.¹

Imitating our culture risks

forgetting first that we don't belong here and second that we're not staying. Imitating our culture means embracing self-responsibility, where our *self-advancement, self-promotion, selfish needs, self-awareness, and self-help* take priority. Even in our Christian lives, we ask: what is my purpose? How can my needs be met? How can I be fulfilled? The Bible is the antithesis of all that is about self: it calls us not to imitate our culture, but to be salt and light in our culture – to be distinct: to preserve and to highlight.

As Christians, we are called to be “imitators of Christ”, to have the mind of Christ; Paul invites us to share in Christ's sufferings and resurrection. Imitating Christ means bearing one another's burdens – not just for a moment, but when it is inconvenient, out of our comfort zones, and difficult. This is the price of true fellowship: stepping out of similarity and familiarity and inviting the stranger in our midst to be part of us, to be *fellow* followers of the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Contemporary culture embraces strength and tells us to excise the weakest link. Christianity, by contrast, embraces weakness – for in our weakness is Christ's strength.

A healthy Christian, like a healthy Church, is not one that boasts in its growth, but one that recognises its sickness and need and dependency on the Great Physician. Today's culture embraces self-sufficiency; Christian culture calls us to embrace total sufficiency on God, without whom nothing is possible; it calls us to look after the waifs and the strays, the lonely and the desolate, the heart-broken and the hurting, those in pain and those lost. We are not to tend the 99 neglecting the one – for it is when that one is found that the angels in heaven rejoice.

We are strangers in this world; our treasures should be in heaven. How often we forget that our destination is not the next self-awareness programme, nor should the glittering gold distract us en route to our destination – for not all that glitters is gold, as C.S. Lewis expresses it:

When we are lost in the words the sight of a signpost is of great matter. He who first sees it cries, “Look!” The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. They will encourage us and we shall be grateful to the authority that set them up. But we

shall not stop and stare, or not much; not on this road, though their pillars are of silver and their lettering of gold. “We would be at Jerusalem.” Not, of course, that I don't often catch myself stopping to stare at roadside objects of even less importance.”²

Let's look at the signs, but not dwell; let's connect with our culture, but not embrace it; let's imitate, but only He whom we follow; let's welcome strangers, for we may be entertaining angels unaware; let's stay as long as we need to, but let's never forget: we are heading for home.

Endnotes

1. Eric Bonabeau, “The Perils of the Imitation Age”, *Harvard Business Review* (June 2004): 45-54.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Fontana, 1959) 190.

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DNA, imago Dei and the soul

Models and metaphors

Human nature is a perplexing topic. Distinguishing characteristics of humanity were once thought to be our upright nature and tool making skills, rationality and language, and in the last token culture making, our moral capacities, and the DNA that guides our formation. What then is *imago Dei*? Intelligence was an easy correlate at times in our intellectual history. But this devalued the body, and is more dubious now that we know so much about animal intelligence, even if in a qualitative sense our intelligence is massive by comparison. As discussed in the

last *Models and Metaphors* column, some animals also are culture making. And human DNA is unique to us, but only just, in statistical terms – humans share 98% with some higher primates; human DNA includes the coding for a mouse's tail – not turned on – and very similar numbers of genes to the mouse, and the mustard weed. All of this has given us more respect for other life forms, but has deflated to some extent our sense of difference.

Recently, searching for an

analogue of the soul John Polkinghorne suggested the form, the pattern, produced in part by DNA was human ensoulment. Even unique DNA, however, is now called into question. *New Scientist* last year published a report on chimeras, people who are the result of embryos that fused during the early days of foetal life, the opposite of identical twins who separated during this same period.¹ The chimeras may be both male and female; mostly the fusion does not come to light and is of no consequence – unless tissue typing

for whatever reason is done and is puzzling; a mother who “cannot” be the parent of her children, for example. Some scientists think that different forms of chimerism are relatively common.

Science has come a long way in a few years, first understanding how close our DNA is to that of primates, and indeed to many other forms of life, next, how comparatively little of it there is, how much of other species is encoded in ours. Now we learn that parts of us may be coded in different ways. What does this mean for *imago Dei*? For unique personhood? The unity in the phenomenon of person, that unity we experience every day in ourselves and in others, the unity assumed in our stories and narratives of existence, is elusive in its definition at a scientific level. The unity we experience is consciousness; but the hard problem of consciousness is proving very difficult to solve scientifically as well. While theology and science are their own discourses, in the dialogue between them we are seeking coherence and mutual affirmation.

Imagine there was a specific something that was easily recognisable and quantifiable. Every human had it and no animal did. In the past such a “something” was probably assumed, not because Scripture insisted, but because a connection was made between image and unique characteristics. Such a unique marker would then be seen to correlate with *imago Dei*, and humans might feel more justified in sacrificing animals for human causes. In fact no such characteristic currently exists. We are much better communicators, our culture is immeasurably complex, our language and symbolic thought are highly developed, but these are all

matters of degree.

This does not mean, however, even in science that everything can be reduced to its least constituents. Increasingly, there is an anti-reductionistic move in the philosophy of science. Different levels of existence are recognised; there are structures of complexity which cannot be predicted from a lower level, and act back upon the lower level casually – the cell upon its constituents for example. The person as a whole acts on their biochemistry. There is disagreement as to whether these levels are ontologically different, and there is no agreed number of levels, but theology can at least be encouraged by the move away from reducing everything to its smallest parts. Some people have argued that human consciousness

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is a new level of “emergence” in the evolutionary process, one that is ontologically different to all that goes before it. At the moment, though, this is not identifiable, nor measurable.

For this and deeper trinitarian reasons, theology has turned more lately to relational accounts of *imago Dei*. Humans are in the image of God because of our special relationship with God, because whatever this unity of personhood is, it serves to access divinity, and conversely because God came as one of us, touching us. Humans are different because upheld by God, manifest perhaps in our *sensus divinitas*, or a sense of “absolute dependence,” as Schleiermacher called it. This relationship with God is associated with and accompanies all our human consciousness and

symbolic and cultural pursuits. While animals have a measure of consciousness they do not show any evidence of God-consciousness.

And image is related also to the person of Christ, the perfect bearer of the image of God. If there is difficulty articulating in scientific terms what *imago Dei* means for us this should not surprise us given that a similar obscurity was attached to the person of Christ. The church recognises him to be both human and divine, but he possessed, in his pre-resurrection life, no measurable difference from us; only a unique relationship to the Father.

Are we left, then, with separate discourses; science describing us from below, and theology from above? The dialogue is more entwined that this, on both sides. Science has been a mirror to our human nature, revealing not only more wonderful structure than we had previously imagined; it has also given us a new appreciation of how close we are to

the animals; and it has raised a host of theological questions. Our theological status though, does give some motivation to the scientific search for consciousness and for more tangibly defined differences between us and animals. Theology is changed also, in its interaction with science; turning more appropriately to relational metaphors rather than ontological ones for defining concepts like *imago Dei*.

Endnotes

1. *New Scientist* (15th November, 2003): 34.

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