

7

Theology in the World

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I have long been bored with the churchiness of the church. We know that when the church – local, regional or national – is preoccupied with its own life, then we may as well give up. Churches are, though, important when we understand them as faltering, localized manifestations of Christ’s Body, or humble attempts to participate in the kingdom of God. Let’s face it: God is always three steps ahead of us, and we’re just playing catch-up. Our theology is an attempt to put that into words. So when we gather as “church” we are not meeting merely to prop each



other up, or just to get a spiritual kick. We are celebrating what God has already done and is doing, and trying to discern together what God seems to want to do next (with us and God’s world). If we’re not doing this, then please let us close down immediately.

But because the church is not the only social form in and through which God works, some of that discernment entails “reading the world”. We come “to church” bringing baggage, but also lots of experience and many questions FROM our participation in wider social and political life (family, employment, community, artistic and sporting activities). We don’t leave all that behind when we sing and pray in the company of others. Nor should we. There is a right sense in which worship is “escape”; it’s a “stepping back”, a “standing apart”. But it is not a ‘cutting off’ from the world we live in. When we worship, we come to listen, to make a joyful noise, to offload, to have a good time (?), to reflect, to be quiet, to be challenged. God speaks there – we trust. But God speaks through lots of other channels too. This is why we have to be deeply attentive to the interweaving of our worshipping experience with the wider world, and attentive, too, to where and how God is already at work in the world beyond the church.

I don’t, then, accept Tom’s largely bleak diagnosis of Babylon. There is much goodness in the world. It is, after all, God’s world, so why would there not be? There is much nastiness too. But it is the job of Christians and others to seek out goodness and oppose evil. In our case, we need a robust, living theology to be able

to do the task of discernment. That's why I've been engaged in theological education all my adult life: I want to keep on learning and helping others to learn. "Theology" is simply the posh word for thinking faith through. We need to do this as naturally as we can (so it does not become a chore) and in such a way that we appreciate how exciting it is. How could it not be exhilarating to explore the reality of God more? To do this in public – alongside those of other faiths and none – and not just in private, amongst ourselves, in churches (though that is good too!) means that we shall always also be faith-sharing. Talking about faith in an informed way has to be a matter-of-fact thing. That's how Babylon is tamed.

Though I don't accept Tom's diagnosis, I'm not over-optimistic either. It is sometimes tough to speak matter-of-factly about faith. There is sometimes a hostility to all forms of religion. (We are old-fashioned, irrational, conservative, prejudiced...as if no-one else is!) But there is often more warmth or willingness to listen than we may expect. Tom is right that as Christians we have sometimes succumbed all too easily to "the ways of the world". I've spent much of my working life deep in budgets, managerial strategies, mission statements and staffing crises. Some of the things that go on within these contexts are far from pleasant. All we can do sometimes is "be Christian" by how we act, and then choose our moment – if given the chance – to say why we try to behave as we do. And sometimes we get it badly wrong.

But the harsh realism of my working life means I'm not sure I accept Tom's diagnosis of managerialism in the church (and the Methodist Church in particular). Or, at least, the diagnosis is too simple. There is indeed managerialism everywhere (cost-cutting, efficiency-saving, streamlining, restructuring), some of it necessary, much of it appallingly done. It's understandable that churches are affected by this. But the fact of re-thinking and re-structuring is not of itself "untheological". The only issue is what sort of structures we should have which enable the more effective welcoming into the world of the kingdom of God. We need to remember how small (numerically) we have become. The demands we place on those who work in our name (presbyters, deacons, lay workers, connexional team staff) are considerable. (We want them always to do more and then get cross when they do things we don't want them to have done.) That said, there are still 180,000 of us (Methodist members) plus many more who are part of churches' wider communities. Perhaps – just perhaps – if we could act as 180,000 local theologians who are constantly re-working a living, energizing understanding of God which informs our whole life, then we'd be a missiological force to be reckoned with. Our theologies would not

(just) be in our heads but would spill out a bit more (and more explicitly) into the daily lives we lead. The spiritual revival which Tom hopes for might come about more gently, but more consistently, and in a way which would undermine Babylon from within. But we do need some sort of organisation of ourselves to do this.

Does the theology come first? Do we have to learn a faith statement on the basis of which we go out into the world to ‘tell it like it is’? Well, not quite, though a few ‘starters for ten’ might be useful. The theology *is* already there (because God came first). But we don’t have to pass an exam in order to be Christian. We stumble into the church for various reasons – because we were taken as children, went along as young people, became associated when our own children got involved, got married there and lingered, went in search of friends, needed support at a time of crisis, enjoyed the music, because our partner goes etc.. And we discover, when church functions at its best, that we are part of a much bigger Story than our own, a Story which interprets us, informs us, challenges us and makes us fully alive. We learn more of it (read the Bible, hear it read to us, listen to sermons, participate in praying – liturgical or otherwise, sing hymns and so on). But we learn it by living it, too, of course. And then we bring stuff back to the workshop known as ‘church’ (‘I thought I was meant to believe this, but this happened and...’; or, ‘now I *get* what that belief must be about’). Theology as a vision is lived and shared, and participated in, not learned by rote. But it is living and needs more than worship to make it live. How are we doing our mulling, exploring, critiquing, discovering?

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