

Telling it slant

Matthew 21.33-46

When I was ordained fifty odd years ago, my Vicar advised me that I should subscribe to a theological journal or two, to ensure I kept my brain ticking over. I so I did – and I kept most of them, though sadly I had to dispose of them when I retired. I guess most months I read with interest, but rarely with real excitement. But about forty years ago I recall there was an article by the then Bishop of Bristol, John Tinsley, which really fired my imagination. It came back to mind as I thought about the Gospel reading today. Jesus wants to let the chief priests and Pharisees see what they were really like. But instead of telling them straight, he tells a story, ostensibly about a vineyard, and leaves them to work out that the story is really about them. Some people don't go for an indirect approach, and say something like 'if only we spoke the truth straight like Peter: "Repent, be baptised, save yourselves" then thousands would be converted in the same way.' I don't think that is true, and Tinsley's article explains why. He called it 'Telling it slant'. That expression comes from a poem by Emily Dickinson which says

Tell all the truth, but tell it slant
Success in circuit lies.

Tinsley says that telling the gospel slant is the only way to communicate it. If you tell it from above to below – vertically - then you reduce it to a communiqué – an authoritative statement which in fact is contradictory to the gospel which talks about God treating human beings with openness. We don't *have* to believe. Jesus has authority, but his teaching is the very antithesis of authoritarian. It is clear, but it is left to the listener to decide what he wants to do with what he has heard. So telling the gospel slant is the appropriate way – to quote Marshall McLuhan 'the medium is the message.' Many poets have seen this is the way to seeing truth. Shakespeare in Hamlet writes 'by indirection find direction out', and W.H.Auden wrote

Truth in any serious sense
Like Orthodoxy, is a reticence.

An unlikely commentator on this was Maurice Wiggin – at one time a TV critic for the Sunday Times. He talked in a purple passage of 'the most reliable guide to the holy and eternal being not the man shouting the latest odds at his stall in the marketplace of personalities, but the artist – poet or priest - who stands at an individual angle to the traffic-choked highway, and looks obliquely into the ravaged and aspiring heart of man.'

And this insight isn't really new. In the c.19th the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard was reflecting on things in his day. He saw that as a 'post-ecclesiastical' time – and we are much more post-ecclesiastical than they were then. He said that thousands and thousands of people who are in no way touched by the gospel nonetheless call themselves Christian. That may be even more true today. But Kierkegaard says it is no use trying to destroy that illusion by direct methods. People wouldn't hear it. What we must do is to attack that complacency by what he calls 'deceit'. Let me quote him to you. 'What does it mean then, to deceive? It means that one does not begin *directly* with the matter one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man's illusions as good money. So one does not begin thus: I am a Christian; you are not a Christian. Nor does one begin thus: it is Christianity that I am proclaiming; and you are living in purely aesthetic categories. No, one begins thus: Let us talk about aesthetics.'

But inevitably there are those who say that is not direct enough – that you can only be taking part in mission if you are talking directly about Jesus, and his teaching and his relationship with the believer. I profoundly disagree: some of the best Christian communication is indirect, poetic and allusive. And it is more important that we communicate the truth than that we are seen to be doing so. A very very long time ago, one of the Church Fathers, Origen, said that we should use Christian ideas and insights, but not fuss about getting them acknowledged as such. It is more important that Christian beliefs should be seen to be true than that they should be labelled as uniquely Christian.

Look at the way Jesus dealt with people as a justification for that approach. He rarely told people in a group what they *must* do. Statements which sound like orders – 'Take up your cross and follow me' in context are open possibilities, not commands – what he actually said was 'if anyone wants to be my disciples, then I say to him Take up your cross...' The only times Jesus gives a command in the same direct style as St Peter was when he was talking to an individual whom he knew and understood. So many times – like for instance with the men he meets on the road to Emmaus – he leaves it to them to make sense of things rather than telling them the sense they were supposed to make of it. So like those exam questions we can 'compare and contrast' the missionary styles of Jesus and Peter. For Jesus it is a matter of proclamation, for Peter it is exhortation. Jesus leaves much more room for manoeuvre than his followers did. He rarely said anything direct about God – it was all allusive, with teaching in parable form and so on.

But you could argue, it certainly worked when Peter said what he did – Repent, be baptised – and three thousand were. Yes - but that was in a particular time and place. Think how quickly the church adapted its missionary methods to other situations, with totally different approaches. Paul in the market place at Athens starts in just the way Kierkegaard was to suggest 1900 years later, with where people were. 'Let's talk about your Gods' he says. He is living out what he wrote to the

Colossians 'Behave wisely towards those outside your number – study how best to talk with each person you meet.'

What is appropriate today? For the majority, the direct approach is not a good way of getting the message across. If it were, then the churches that take that line would be markedly fuller than others – and that really isn't the case. We need to learn to tell it slant – to be so imbued with Christian ideas and understanding that we can communicate the truth as it is in Jesus without being so blunt that we put people off. We don't have to throw it at people like a stone, as Paul Tillich memorably put it.

Telling it straight brings immense problems, because it tends to be full of theological jargon and makes theological presuppositions that are not meaningful to most people. Think again of Peter's message – Repent, Be Baptised, Save Yourself. All those words have a precise and definable meaning which is quite complex, and also quite alien to the way people think and speak today. His hearers were religious people in a religious society – they knew what repentance, baptism and salvation were about (or thought they did). The truths which those words represent are as true today as they were then. But they need to be approached in a new way, not frontally, but indirectly, so that their truth is seen to *be* truth. With children and education this is taken for granted – you start where they are and lead them from the known to the unknown. That is what telling it slant suggests as well. We approach people from what they *do* accept to what they have not yet grasped – that this man Jesus has shown us God's love and provided us with a way of receiving and responding to that love. But he gives us freedom to respond or otherwise: he doesn't pin us to the wall and say 'Now believe!' Jesus told it slant, and so must we.

I am addicted to the Peanuts cartoons of Charles Schulz. I have the complete Schulz oeuvre on my bookshelf. Schulz quite deliberately did Christian teaching and mission through his cartoons - quite brilliantly. Robert Short wrote two books about the theology of Peanuts – 'The Gospel according to Peanuts' and 'The Parables of Peanuts'. He recalls one sequence of drawings: the very first cartoon has Charlie Brown saying 'Believe in me, believe in me.' The others walk past and ignore him. He puts his big round head in his hands and says 'I just can't get people to believe in me.' Maybe he needed, like his creator, to tell it slant.