

THE SPIRIT AND LEFT-FIELD THEOLOGY

A temptation that Christians have to resist is to contract God to what they know of God through their own theology. If we think and speak arrogantly about God then our thinking is probably idolatrous.

Any such thinking is challenged by the shocks that still reverberate throughout the Bible. For within the history of the People of God devout believers have been shocked into recognising that God is not constrained or contained by their thinking and beliefs.

We could undertake a shock-take of events within the Bible that led to new insights into God's actions and God's providence. For example, think of the shock to Peter that God commanded him to baptise the Roman Centurion Cornelius (a pagan).

The account is vivid in Acts chapter 10. Peter is dragged almost kicking and screaming theologically to the waters for that baptism. The question that had to be asked after that ministry with Cornelius was, do you now get the Gospel, Peter?

Peter had to change his mind and realise that the Gospel has universal dimensions and withstands our shrinkage of it. As Faber's classic hymn puts it:

for the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind.

Consider also the massive shock to the true-believing Jews that Isaiah dropped on them when Isaiah called King Cyrus of Persia "God's anointed" (Isaiah 45:1) and even more pointedly says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose" (Isaiah 48:28).

That would have been considered left-field theology! It would have shocked deeply believing faithful Jews who had grown to think of God in very domesticated terms.

Isaiah is talking about a foreign invader who ruled the then known world and who would most naturally have been thought of as the enemy.

Suddenly, Cyrus is being introduced as God's anointed (a deeply religious accolade) and performing a leadership role on God's behalf. The ordinary Jew hearing Isaiah would have concluded that theology had gone topsy-turvy and that nothing was stable anymore.

I have selected only two instances of the shock-take that we could undertake throughout the Scriptures. These two instances are similar to many others that insist that God cannot be constrained in our thinking. And such recognition is important as we come to the great festival of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit is always ahead of God's People and thus ahead of the Church, coaxing us, provoking us and even propelling us to see where God is working within the Creation.

So, maybe with the Spirit's insight (a gift prayed for in Confirmation) we will identify happily that the Spirit is working through sources outside the Church to further God's purposes.

Such a conclusion will mean that we look respectfully at provocative movements such as human rights activists who bring the sufferings of others to our attention.

For example, when a group of vigilant citizens notice that refugees are being housed in slum conditions and provoke media scrutiny, might we not conclude that such awareness-raising coalesces with God's desire for justice and mercy? Is not the Spirit working there, as clearly the Spirit was in Cyrus?

The Holy Spirit is a provocateur for God. We might struggle against some movements as is happening with the whole climate debate, but what if we approached this kind of issue from a left-field theology that seriously digested the named actions of the Spirit of God in Holy Scripture? What then?

There are hymns and prayers that suggest the wildness of the Spirit, the profligacy of the Spirit, the anonymity of the Spirit.

Might I suggest that you assemble this Pentecost a shock-take of the movements of the Spirit in Scripture and note down the surprises.

Perhaps these detected surprises will enable you to sight the present-day work of the Spirit outside the Church, in God's world.

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