

# The Gospel – in Four Stories

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## Story 1

It was 1972. I can remember exactly where I was when it happened. I was on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the Arts Tower of Sheffield University, sitting in the departmental library, with the city behind me and hills out to my right. Those of you who know Sheffield, will know you are never far away from hills! I was doing an undergraduate course on Pauline theology and preparing for an essay that was due. I was reading a New Testament scholar, Krister Stendahl, whom I have subsequently learnt was also involved in ministry as a Lutheran bishop. I mention this because I'm not talking here about someone locked within the proverbial ivory tower but rather a person who wanted to integrate the world of theological research with my world of ministry and mission. It's not an option to keep them apart. To do this is the start of death for the church – a long slow terminal decline in thinking by cutting ourselves off from one, I underline one, source of renewal of both gospel and church. I think it was Os Guinness who said, 'Most Christians would rather die than think. They usually do!'

Stendahl's essay had the unpromising title of '*The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.*' I had chanced upon it, no doubt following through references in other writers. It was one of those moments when – using Luke's description of Paul's conversion – 'something like scales fell from (my) eyes.' I had been brought up to believe that the gospel was a set of ideas about God's scheme of salvation that had been revealed in propositions to men, most definitely men, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Our job, a bit like South African diamond miners, was to mine the seam for nuggets that would yield its treasure of unchanging doctrine as it was cut, polished, and then set for all times, places and generations thereafter. Now there's much within my upbringing I cherish, but I'm describing the moment when I discovered that things weren't quite as I had been taught. It wasn't that the essay was a frontal assault on precious beliefs by one of those wicked liberals I'd been taught to be wary of. In fact it wasn't an attack at all. It was more like being introduced to a landscape in which I had lived all my life, but now suddenly seeing it with completely new eyes. T S Eliot captured the experience when he wrote about how we are brought back to a familiar place from which we started but now '*recognise the place for the first time.*' I was having such a moment in the Arts Tower. Admittedly I couldn't see all the implications of what I had seen, but I knew that things had fundamentally changed because of it.

The gospel truth I'd been taught often focused on Paul rather than Jesus. It's surprising that never struck me as strange. His teaching was more important than Jesus' when it came to THE GOSPEL. And Romans was *la crème de la crème*. I had been told it was the most coherent and thought through presentation of THE GOSPEL. Being insanely brief, this was to do with human guilt and sin, God's answer and provision to save us through Christ and so finally, 'there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... for there's nothing that is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' The high point of letter had been reached. After that in chapters 9-11 Paul had a bad day; perhaps an attack of indigestion, but recovered later after taking Alka-Selzers, to write sensible, practical stuff in chapter 12 onwards! This was the familiar landscape. But with Krister's guidance, he pointed out a number of features I had totally ignored. He showed me I was reading Paul through the eyes of Martin Luther and his desperate struggle with his introspective conscience. Whereas in fact, Martin Luther's desperate and much needed struggle, from which we've all benefited whether we know it or not, was not Paul's concern. Yes, there were points of overlap, but there were critical differences. Being aware of those differences made all the difference! Paul was developing his understanding of the

significance of Jesus for the set of circumstances he was wrestling with – keeping Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus together as a sign of God's new thing being done in his generation. Now I had never heard that before. All that Jew-Gentile stuff had either been airbrushed out as long-since irrelevant or subsumed into a treatise about the sheer wonder of God's grace against the legalism of general human self-effort to pull yourself up by your own boot-laces. Sounds familiar?

In the Arts Tower that day I was being introduced to one of those posh phrases used by theologians, but in fact is quite a simple idea. Paul's message was a 'contextual gospel.' It was a message about God's righteousness and grace but applied to a specific set of circumstances, in a certain time and place and for a particular people. In many ways the rest of my life has been reflecting on the significance of having a truly contextual gospel, for if it ain't contextual, it ain't fully gospel.

## Story 2

It's a Saturday afternoon in the summer of 2002. We're off to Heaton Park in North Manchester for the final jamboree of a week of city-wide mission that had seen some amazing projects undertaken in local communities. All the paraphernalia of a big event was there, including rides and food vans with the kind of instant menu that sends my health-conscious veggie wife berserk. The sights, sounds, smells and anticipation of the programme for the day mingled to conjure – if I'm allowed that word – the atmosphere of festival. Great dance routines, superb presentations of the week's work in the communities, vision of the world's great need, and passion and communication as always from Andy Hawthorne.

So there I was with Helena, my wife, my eldest daughter Rebecca and her new boyfriend and husband to be, who had not been part of a church throughout his childhood. This was going to be different. It was contemporary, real-life, relevant. A good place to take someone with either a vague or growing interest in spiritual things – a showcase for modern, contemporary Christianity. There had been a toe-curlingly awful gospel message earlier at the skate park, of the 'turn or burn' variety, full on and smack in your face. But that apart, things were set fair. The time eventually came for the international evangelist to talk. And...and...er... it rained? You might be thinking that as you join the words summer – park – event – Manchester! If it had, it might have been better. The polite way of saying this is that it was underwhelming. A more accurate description of my feelings would be confused, disappointed, frustrated, and finally not surprised if a non-Christian left the event concluding that the Christian faith had nothing incisive to say or relevant to offer. The deeds of the week and the words of the gospel were disconnected.

I suppose I was touching the opposite of what I had discovered about Paul in Story 1, that while he offered a 'contextual gospel', this was anything but. It felt as though the preacher had not done his work on the culture of Western Europe, let alone an industrial city of Northern England. The language and concepts used were all familiar from my childhood and adolescence growing up in the 50's and 60's in South London, but standing there with my son-in-law to be, who is thoughtful and questioning, it just didn't connect. If I'm honest, it was plain boring as though a formula was being trotted out, without any bite. I could see there were some who responded who it had clearly 'touched,' but for me it was one of those moments when something crystallized. I came away thinking, 'We need to do some work on our understanding of gospel.' I talked with others and generally there was a feeling it had not been effective preaching of the gospel. However when I talked with some fellow ministers there was a shrug of the shoulders and a feeling that as long as people made decisions it could be tolerated, it was not a big issue, just a bad preach. The job was being done and that's all we needed to worry about. Perhaps this alarmed me more than anything, because it betrayed a mindset that getting results, 'decisions for Christ,' takes

away the need to think about what an authentic gospel message is. It's this attitude that permits inadequate gospel preaching to continue.

So over the days, as I reflected, the idea came to me that we were still in danger of perpetuating a lazy gospel. What I was reaching after in that phrase was the assumption, even presumption that we knew the gospel and were its guardians, and this let us off the hook of thinking long, deep and hard about the people to whom we were speaking. The need to think about peoples' struggle to make sense of their lives and give it shape, about also their deepest yearnings and aspirations, and above all being willing to listen to all these until they were heard into speech. We cannot ever rest content, priding ourselves that we are inheritors of the Reformation, that time of great triumph for the gospel. To merely reproduce the ideas, images and metaphors they used is not enough. For if the concerns, hopes and preoccupations of our own day are not drawn into the purifying process of a genuine reflecting faith, then the life of Christ has not been offered and his message has not been heard. If my Arts Tower experience had told me anything it was that the gospel could only be rendered authentically if it addressed people's current contents and discontents, and it is never sufficient to hide behind well-worn formulas and presumed doctrines from previous generations. The gospel must have continuity with the one who lived, died for our sins and was raised from death, but it must illuminate and meet the underlying anxieties of our time.

### Story 3

Actually this one is two stories but which are linked. Mainstream Conference 2007 and our theme: 'Dangerous People? – unleashing intentional discipleship.' It sounds a bit like a headline in the local rag: 'Dog shelter break-out. Rottweilers on the loose.' But be that as it may, here I am in our seminar stream on personal discipleship in which Helena and I shared a little on personal prayer. This is not a good start to a story. Could there be anything less inviting as an opening to a story than, 'We were sitting in a Christian conference seminar meeting and...' But I can't make it up. Eddie Lyle of Open Doors, without more than a moment's introduction, shows a video of a courtroom in Indonesia where three extraordinary Christian women are on trial because they taught Muslim children in a Sunday school class. The scenes outside the courthouse, where judgement is about to be given and sentence passed, is ugly. A crowd of Muslims are baying for blood, quite literally. They want them killed and hanged. It's loud, very loud. The echoes of 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' are easily heard in my mind. Intimidating is a euphemism to describe the scene. Eddie told us they got a three-year prison sentence and that he was about to visit them in prison. The church of which they are a part, and which one of the ladies started, chooses to travel for an hour and a half each Sunday to worship with them. It was deeply moving, everything within this middle-class liberal minded Christian who wants to be nice to everyone, is confronted with the raw hatred and venom of those who want my fellow believers destroyed.

MacDonalds in Stockport. Yes, there *is* an even less hopeful start to a story! It's week three of my sabbatical and I'm there to meet Tabesh. He's an asylum seeker from Afghanistan. His story is fascinating and in its own way equally disturbing. During his first year at Kabul University where he is studying Law, (in Islamic countries this is the main branch of 'religious' learning, not theology as in the Christian tradition), he has to give a paper on a subject of his choosing. His chosen area: human rights and gender issues in Islamic Law. This does not go down well! He is thrown out of University by the staff. Through the operation of 'shame' culture, his whole family – which is already part of the minority Shi'ite community – have to leave for Iran where Shi'ites are the majority. Eventually Tabesh arrives in England and starts to learn English at a college in Stockport and gets into conversation with a Christian teacher. When in Afghanistan he had seen

films about Jesus and wondered about this very different portrayal of one of Islam's prophets, 'Isa' as they call him. There seemed to him a distinct spirit in the man compared to the culture he was experiencing. Intrigued, and away from the thought police of a very traditional Islamic society, he enquires more about Jesus the Messiah, and finding faith, joins a Christian church.

The stories are linked: they are both bad-them, good-us stories of Islam. Put those stories against the background of the relentless bad stories of Islam that seem almost daily at the moment, and you have a pretty depressing picture of Islam being painted for the average Westerner and committed Christian. Although I do notice some parts of the media working hard to get another story of Islam seen and heard, it can't be easy for an ordinary decent Muslim. It's not. Here's one of their most erudite and calming spokesmen currently in the West, Tariq Ramadan of Oxford University, the voice of a rational, spiritually-minded Muslim, working hard for his fellow-religionists to make a positive contribution to Western society. 'I think there is a great deal of fear, and you have political forces using this fear in order to set an agenda – I call this an 'ideology of fear'. To build something from this situation, they use an 'us-versus-them' theory – the 'clash of civilisations', fears that we are all victims. So we perceive ourselves as the victims of the expansionist's agenda. On the other side, Muslims feel that they are the targets of a new Islamophobia. So we are in a world of victims, unable to live together. We are driven by emotions, which is really frightening.'

It is, and it was from a world just like this that Jesus comes into our midst and says, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' What does a gospel for this context look like? I've spent the last three months pondering this on sabbatical.

#### **Story 4**

Things were looking up. No longer the Arts Tower, or Baptist conference seminar, and certainly not MacDonalds. I was there to meet Ajmal, an advisor on Islam for Channel 4, for breakfast. It was the main conference hotel of the Harrogate International Conference Centre. Ooh! Nice! They don't do rubbish in Harrogate. He could not give me much time because he was involved in a TV shoot about which my son-in-law had been giving me a stream of impressions. He was the sound-man for the programme – the guy with the furry rabbit. It's a programme trying to give another side of Islam from bombers, Afghanistan and the Baghdad debacle. I was keen to find out what drives a thoughtful Muslim. He told how as a young man he took part in the protests against *The Satanic Verses*, which he now regrets. He shared how his family home was searched by security forces at a time of heightened fears owing to bomb scares, because his brother and he were marked men following that protest. His brother was arrested and questioned for some time, but released without charge because there was no evidence. It left his family feeling nervous; disturbed by the actions of the security forces. I talked about a book I had been reading by someone who had been involved with Hitz-ut Tahrir, the extremist Islamic group that operates in Western countries. He came out of it with a disturbing message of its ideology and how it operates. Ajmal knew the guy, was at college with him, and was upset that he named people unnecessarily, who will now be marked by the security forces. I touch on the area of violence and Islam. 'These people have nothing to do with Islam. They're not Muslims. They're criminals.' I suggest that it might help if all our traditions could face up to how they can be used to justify violence. He was having nothing to do with it. He became more animated. 'No we will never own it. It's nothing to do with Islam.'

My mind drifted to another meal; to the restaurant at Didcot the HQ of Baptist life. It was a conversation with someone who worked there. Somehow we had got on to Islam and he said, 'What is it about Islam that nurtures terrorists?' I had just finished reading a book about apocalyptic thinking and the American Right and its influence on current American foreign policy. I was aware of things that George W Bush had said after the 'victory' in Iraq, like his speech to the troops to the MacDill Airbase, the command centre of the Iraq War, 'The freedom you defend is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world; it is God's gift to humanity.' And so without thinking, looking over the glory that is Didcot, I said, 'We might be able to ask that question when we answer what it is about Christianity that nurtures emperors.' I wasn't trying to be clever or rude. I was becoming aware just how much religion and violence are interwoven.

I am slow but I am waking up to the significance of the post-War migrations bringing increasing numbers with stark differences of faith, practice and understanding to our country. All this adds hugely to the varieties of secular thinking and practice that are constantly growing. Human beings, certainly in the West, have never experienced this degree of cultural pluralism ever before. And it won't lessen but is likely to grow as global forces shape our world. But it's been the atmosphere of heightening tension with Islam in particular that prompted me to use my sabbatical to begin to tease some questions that arise for Christian believers in these altered conditions. What kind of gospel and spirituality do we need to be forming to help believers live in a pluralist society where fear lies close to the surface, and where Christianity will probably never again have the opportunity to influence the moral and spiritual framework as it once did? Can we assume that the straight assertion that Jesus is Lord, having unique and universal authority, has credibility as a way of sharing the good news? Will making this the centrepiece of our gospel, not merely rule out chances of being heard now or in the future, but also create a people who may be secure in the absolute rightness of their faith, but are not well formed to hold their faith healthily in our pluralist society?

These are deep questions and answers are not easy. But this has been my work over the last few months. I have started writing an extensive paper, which begins to explore these matters. For me it's a working document. I've called it contour outlines of gospel and spirituality formation, because I'm trying to sketch for myself the first impressions I have of a new landscape I think we're facing in this country. We may live in the white suburbs, but we all know this is a big one. And we need and have a gospel to match.

If you would like a copy of my full paper, as far as I've written, I'm more than willing for people to read it. But it's not for everyone! It is demanding and you've got to be willing to think hard, and outside the box! But my prayer and hope is that it will be a contribution to help us live faithfully in worship of our Saviour and Lord, who is the true Lord of all.

I will be thinking where next to take the practical outworking of this and its application to our life as a church and the local area. I'd be happy to hear your thoughts on this.

If you would like a copy of my paper please contact me on [stephenibbotson@altrinchambaptist.org](mailto:stephenibbotson@altrinchambaptist.org)