

# Letting the gospel run wild

## Simon Jones introduces Alison Morgan

It's doubtful that Dante's *Divine Comedy* has featured much in meal time conversations at the Mainstream Conference. But that could change this year. Alison Morgan, one of our keynote speakers, completed a PhD on the Thirteenth century Italian poet at the University of Cambridge. Her well-regarded thesis, *Dante and the Medieval Other World*, has recently been republished in paperback by Cambridge University Press.

Of course, she won't be joining us to talk about Dante. Rather she's part of our trio of speakers unpacking the main conference theme, *Grasping the Gospel*.

It was while researching her PhD that Alison came to faith in Jesus, a story she tells in the introduction to her book on faith called *The Wild Gospel* (Monarch 2004).

She writes: 'My friend died. Her name was Ruth, and she had been my Director of Studies as an undergraduate. They told me one day, as I walked from the library back to my college for lunch, that the cancer had returned. She was 41, dark-haired, intelligent and vivacious, with everything to live for. She inhabited a square, chaos-filled room with a big window overlooking the sunlit grass of the college quadrangle, pictures by her school-age children pinned crookedly to the walls, books and papers piled high on the desk, stimulus and encouragement oozing out of the brickwork for those who reached the mark of her high standards.'

'I had spent many hours there breathing it all in, and she had changed me. Over the next few months I was to spend many hours with her again, shorter visits this time, sharing the jokes I'd picked up from my fellow-researchers at lunch time, and watching her die. And as I found myself forced to face the fact that that was what was going to happen, the universe that I had so carefully arranged around me fell apart. As the cancer consumed her body and dimmed her spirit, an earthquake rumbled beneath my platform of contingent truth, and the bricks of my self-constructed meaning began to totter and slide. Fresh back from Italy, I felt like the tower of Pisa: a magnificent edifice, the source of endless satisfaction to those who had built it, and the object of wonder and envy to the lesser buildings around it, now lurching over because it turned out to have been built on an unstable foundation.'

'Ruth herself, by contrast, was more worried about the lectures she was supposed to be writing than about the prospect of impending death. She was a Christian. She didn't want to die; but she knew where she was going, and she felt quite capable of going there. We talked about it. The strength of Christianity, she said, lay for her in the fact that it had been found to make sense in many different cultures. It had a universality about it; it was not subject to history or geography. And so she took me back to the Middle Ages we'd spent so many hours discussing in that sun-filled room 3 years previously, and asked me a simple question: could I imagine existentialism making sense in the 13th century? And almost before she'd got the words out, dynamite exploded beneath my unsteady marble tower and blew it to smithereens. Of course I couldn't. I left the house that day drained and empty. You cannot construct your own reality. There are absolute truths, and one of them is death. Build what you like, but you're building it in a bubble. And sooner or later the bubble will meet a pin. Mine just had.

Ruth died on March 31st 1983. I saw her the evening before she died. She wished me a Happy Easter, and I think those were the last coherent words she spoke. A week before, she'd given me a book. It was a beautiful copy of the Visconti Hours, a 15th century Italian illuminated prayer book, and in it she'd written, in Latin, the following words: *I know two masters: Christ and letters*'.

The impact of Ruth's death on Alison was so profound for a variety of reasons but one was undoubtedly that as a young person, Alison had set out on a quest to find the truth or if not *the* truth, at least a truth strong enough to build a life on.

'It seemed to me,' she writes in the introduction to *The Wild Gospel*, 'that if I could find the answer to this question, I would be standing on some kind of basic platform from which it would be possible to try and build the building that would be my life.'

Her answer as a teenager was to become an existentialist. She'd worked out that there were two types of truth – absolute and contingent. She despaired of finding the former but felt it possible to build a life on the latter. After all, contingent truth dealt with every day realities – the train I want leaves from platform 1, the chair in the corner will hold my weight, the switch on the wall will turn the light on.

'Because it seemed to me that to believe any contingent truth was an act of faith, and because I remembered from going to church parade as a Brownie that faith was what Christianity was supposed to be about, I went out and bought myself a Bible,' she recalls. 'The problem was that I couldn't understand it. Chairs and trains I was familiar with, but this book didn't seem to speak my language. So I returned to the philosophy section of the school library, and discovered Jean-Paul Sartre and existentialism. And I found that Sartre did speak my language. In fact he offered precisely what I was looking for: the suggestion that in the absence of the existence of any absolute truth the only way to make sense of life was to create one's own meaning.'

And so she remained a happy existentialist, became fluent in Italian, developed a love for medieval literature and the rest would have been history – until her friend died. And contingent truth no longer cut it for Alison Morgan. She went back to the Bible, read and sought help in her reading.

'I read John's gospel, and admired the broad sweep of his philosophical concepts, but failed to understand any of his references to the Holy Spirit. My world didn't have a space for the Holy Spirit; my world was the tangible world of libraries and relationships, ambitions and bicycles. I took my Spiritless summary of John back to Ruth's husband in Cambridge.

'How would I like to pursue my quest, he asked. I could look at Christianity as a philosophy, and think about whether it made sense of the world I lived in - whether Ruth was right, and it would do a better job of offering meaning and purpose to any culture and any society than had my existentialism. Or I could look at it historically, and think about Jesus, the man who stood at its centre - for although the Christian faith was just that, a faith, it claimed to be founded on a fact, the fact of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and a fact furthermore which if it was indeed accepted as a fact would change the whole shape of the universe for me yet again. Or I could look at it experientially, and think about the lives of people like Ruth who had lived and died by it, and seemed to find it satisfactory.'

'In the end I did all three. And I arrived, some months later, at the conviction that I had at last found absolute truth. Absolute truth was God, and it came incarnate in his son Jesus. It made sense of life both personally and universally. It offered a framework of meaning that could not be shattered by anything I could think of that life might throw at it; and it extended beyond my material and psychological world into a new world, a second, overlay world, a world of spiritual reality, a world of truth in a different dimension. And so it was that my journey began.'

Since then Alison has been engaged in a quest to discover and live the truth for herself and help others to find it as well. Ordained in 1996, on the staff of Holy Trinity, Leicester where her husband is the incumbent, she also works with ReSource, a ministry with an Anglican distinctive, seeking to serve the church by teaching, training, and encouraging people to renew their lives and their church through the power of the Holy Spirit, so that God's message of life-changing love reaches out to others. The website describes her as ReSource's thinker and writer.

She reports that over the past three years they've worked with 23 dioceses, facilitated 28 deanery or regional gatherings, spoken at 15 conferences and engaged with countless individual parishes.

Reflecting on all that work, she recalls a conversation with one vicar where he put into words something that lots of Christians up and down the land feel: 'We live in a culture which dents and knocks our confidence as Christians.'

Alison agrees that this is a pressing issue for us. We are bombarded by a secularist agenda that calls us 'to unite around a shared belief in nothing, a position held up as the epitome of maturity and tolerance.'

Her response is to go deeper than philosophy normally takes us into relationship. 'Maybe it is open to us not to wind the clock back so much as to offer a new way of thinking about life, one based neither on revelation nor on scientific expertise, but simply on relationship,' she says, adding that 'philosopher Michael Polanyi has suggested there is. He points out that we cannot know things outside a fiduciary framework – that there is no such thing as an 'objective' understanding, however much Dawkins may like to claim that there is. Knowledge comes, as Einstein said, not in a vacuum of objectivity but as a hypothesis – one you have to commit yourself to in order to test it out, to see if it holds up. The claim that it can be arrived at objectively, without some prior assumption which acts as a foundation, is false.'

For her that relationship is found in Jesus: 'Jesus stands outside both the worldviews we have inherited,' she argues, 'offering us not primarily a part in the history of a people, or an understanding of the created world, but a personal relationship which will change our very being, and draw us into a completely new place.'

In a very real sense this absolute truth about Jesus is the very contingent truth she was looking for as teenager: 'Christianity is a person. He's a person who, when you meet him, offers you the sudden realisation that you no longer need to buy all that stuff, or to toss and turn in your bed at night. Why should we have confidence in this good news we share? Well, because it makes a difference. It actually works.'

All the quotes in this article are either from the Introduction to Alison's book 'The Wild Gospel' or an article entitled 'Confidence in the Gospel' available on her website [www.alisonmorgan.co.uk](http://www.alisonmorgan.co.uk).  
The ReSource website can be found at [www.resource-arm.net](http://www.resource-arm.net)