

Divine Communication Christmas 2011

The poet Edwin Muir was born on the Island of Orkney off the coast of Scotland. Throughout his growing up years he was a sensitive and shrewd observer of the churches, of the religious activities, and of the spiritual leaders who practised their craft in his vicinity. Commenting on the Church of Scotland Ministers, whose sermons he often listened to, he had this to say, "They took the word made flesh and turned him back into words."

Those of us whose job it is to communicate the gospel Sunday by Sunday could usefully reflect on that comment often. We are living in a time when preachers often fall back on power point presentations, film clips, and other pieces of visual technology to keep the congregation's attention. Yet in the end the preachers art is about realising the power that words have to enchant. Divine truth has to take shape in the world of language in such a way that it can enter the experience, the thought world, and the cultural horizons of the people to whom it is addressed. Often Divine truth is a very different way of thinking to the way we usually think about our daily lives, and it is the preacher's task to make sense of this contrast – to make that Divine truth come alive in the understanding of the hearers, without selling that startling truth short.

Being a good communicator in this kind of a way is always a challenge, yet there is an inspiring example of how it is done that comes from the great communicator himself – God. God is constantly in touch with our world and with all its peoples, dialoguing with them in a variety of ways that enable them to tune in. The Bible is itself a record of many of these highly creative ways that God has reached out to human beings in ways that they can understand.

Take for instance the way Jesus communicated with the crowds who had had no prior experience of his teaching, and some of who may not have been in the mood to be sympathetic to what he had to say. He used parables, stories drawn from everyday life that drew the listeners in with the tension in the narrative, and that then explode with a surprise ending that turn the listeners world upside down.

Of course communication isn't just about words. As the writer of one of the Johanne epistles declares, "Our love is not just to be mere talk." Which is why in many gospel scenes Jesus is an action man, healing the sick, cleansing lepers, walking on water, casting out demons, and raising the dead. The point of all this activity is to show what the Kingdom is like that he talks about in his preaching and teaching.

And it is not just spectacular supernatural activity and miracles that are the vehicles of communication. There are acts of loving service and hospitality that point beyond themselves to the generosity and magnanimity of God. In washing feet and in hosting the unrighteous at banquets Jesus speaks volumes about the qualities of mercy and celebration that are dear to the heart of his loving heavenly Father, without having to open his mouth. One of the best definitions of Christianity I have heard is that it is, "Love in action." In his doing and in his acting Jesus shows us the way to get with the action.

But the way in which all this gets started is the most startling act of communication itself. Beneath the heart-warming image of a baby in a manger something quite remarkable is happening. Today's gospel says, "The Word became flesh." William Barclay put it another way – "The Mind of God became a person." The words that God has been speaking to the human race since its beginnings have become a Word, a powerful self contained unit of meaning that sums up all that God is, and that Word has now translated itself into a human being. This human being is destined to become the shape, pattern, and definition of what it is to be a human being made in God's image.

It goes without saying that there is a huge gap between God and the world, a vast distance between that invisible Spirit, that plenitude of being who is our creator, and us. That distance is important because without it we would lose our freedom. How could we be free to love God or to reject him if we were backed up against an in your face, unavoidably ever present, and oppressively omnipotent Divine being who stood over all our choices and decisions? No, he must give us the space and the time to choose or to reject him, which is what love is all about, even if the price tag is living in a world in which the existence of God is by no means obvious. The other down side of this distance factor is that living in this world in which human freedom is the name of the game means that we have taken Frank Sinatra's words to heart, "I did it my way," to the point where our independently minded way of thinking makes it hard for us to tune in to the Divine logic. We are so in to autonomy, and our own self-interest, that looking at the world through God's eyes is very difficult for us.

In the incarnation God decided to cross this divide in such a way that we would keep our freedom, would retain the right to choose for or against him, while at the same time he would disclose himself fully to us in our way of being in the world, and on our terms. The Divine Mind would disclose itself fully in the details of a developing human being who, as he grew to full adult stature, would give us the measure of what a human being is supposed to be.

What is happening here is a two way process. We are witnessing, as it were, the humanization of God, and in return, if we care to take advantage of the offer, the divinization of human beings. In the stall

at Bethlehem we see Jesus Christ modifying his being so as to make it possible to unite himself to us. He is changing the register, the tenor and the tone of his personal existence so as to tune in to our way of being. He has become like us so that we can become like him. Now we can get the message, get with the programme, reach out and grasp what God has in mind for us, because it is available to us in quite a tangible way.

Jesus Christ in his person is a frontier zone in which the Divine and human natures meet. Now we can see what it is like to cross over the frontier. He has become very close to us, but in such a way as to remain quite other from us. Yet he invites us to become, as it were, his junior brothers and sisters by adoption and grace. Now we can join his family, start thinking the way God does, and as we share in our small way in the mind of Christ, the rest of us, body and spirit, will drawn afterwards to be transformed in the same way.

Edwin Muir has fired a shot across our bows to remind us what Christmas is all about. We are to take the words, words, words of sermons, liturgies, and prayers, and to turn them into the flesh of ourselves becoming Jesus Christ's junior brothers and sisters. Our faith is not just to be all talk and good ideas, but is to become love in action. Acts of loving service and gracious hospitality are to follow on from speaking the good news to other people. And the more we do this the more we will become agents of healing, and of deliverance, and of new life to other people. In this way we will become very powerful communicators indeed.