

Adopting the linguistic principle of ‘dynamic equivalence’, it uses standard, everyday English. Looked down upon by scholars, it is the most intelligible of all English Bibles for general use. For that reason it is the version that my church uses in public worship.

The latest best-selling Bible is *The Message* by Eugene Peterson, an American Presbyterian from an evangelical tradition. More of a paraphrase than a literal translation, it presents problems to some British evangelical leaders whose views on biblical inspiration mean they would prefer a more literal version. I confess that my own initial response was less than welcoming, but people in the pews love the freshness. As a result, I have put away my academic prejudices, and take a broader view. For what’s the point of a Bible translation if it doesn’t communicate?

At a time when increasing numbers of people are unaware of the claims of the Christian faith, church leaders should concentrate on making the ‘good news’ accessible to people today - and if this means going ‘down-market’ in the scholarship stakes, so what? Going ‘down-market’ is surely what the incarnation is all about!

WE WANT IT ALL, & WE WANT IT NOW?

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For activist pastors the idea of waiting, of finding ourselves disempowered or helpless is difficult. We want news of how to be successful, how to be present and empowered for ministry. We do not like waiting, we want it now. But any spirituality that is adequate for ministry must embrace this element of human experience, or it will not match the reality of life.

This activism and obsession with success owes more to the impatience of the have-it-all-now society than to genuine and realistic Christian faith and ministry. The Christian faith was forged in a culture where the limitations of human effort were only too obvious: a fever would carry off a child, a farm accident could kill a previously fit man, and the predations of infection meant that few lived to an age that we would now consider normal. We have lost any sense of our fragility as a culture, with talk of

medical science being able to prolong life to hundreds of years, and that a person born today will probably live to over a hundred, if not two hundred years of age.

It is here that the theology of Holy Saturday comes to the fore. We preach often on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but Holy Saturday? Holy Saturday, that period between the deposition from the cross on Good Friday and the explosion of joy and life that is Resurrection morning on the First day of the week is less familiar. Holy Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath, and I want to consider the importance of disengagement from ministry to be effective in ministry, as well as faithful to the demands of authentic discipleship.

But before we engage with this theme, we should reflect a little on what we mean by 'ministry'.

1. The ordained ministry of word and sacrament is the ministry of the church. It is not ours individually (my ministry,) so much as the **ministry of the whole church**, focussed in a particular way amongst those called and set apart to express it.

2. While it is the ministry of the church **it is different in kind to the ministry that every disciple is called to offer**. There has been a promiscuous use of the word 'ministry' in recent years, a usage where the term ministry defines the vocation of the whole people of God. From the Second Vatican Council's document *Lumen Gentium*, to the Restorationist's understanding of ministry derived from a Brethren-like anti-clericalism, the distinctive character of Christian ministry has been undermined.

Accompanied by calls to develop every member ministry, which few would challenge, the outcome has been both confusion and a loss of distinctives for those whom we have traditionally called 'ministers', replacing the term with the word 'leader.' Ministry - *diakonia* - is obviously an aspect of the calling upon every disciple, as is prayer, virtue, and fellowship, but it is not always representational, and herein lies the distinctive. To serve others is a godly thing to do, but in ordained ministry this becomes a way of life that represents the church as a whole in a way that for others it is a personal aspect of discipleship. This representational dimension of *diakonia* is unhelpfully confused with discipleship and results in both a loss of the radical call to discipleship upon every follower of Jesus, epitomised in those words of Bonhoeffer:

‘When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.’⁷⁵ and in a functional reductionist view of ministry. ‘Discipleship is a common obligation of all the baptized, but ministry is by its nature a summons to some particular, explicit work for and on behalf of the church.’⁷⁶ We need to renew again an understanding of ministry as representational Christian service, conducted by men and women called and set apart to this way of life, who live as a sign of the Kingdom of God. ‘In order to fulfil its mission, the church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence upon Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within a multiplicity of gifts, a focus of its unity. The ministry of such persons, who since very early times have been ordained, is constitutive for the life and witness of the Church.’⁷⁷

3. That this high view of ministry is present implicitly amongst churchgoers is seen in the oft-heard cry of the shut-ins that the church does not visit. Despite visits from the pastoral care team and the care of elderly visitors, it is the absence of the pastor or vicar, the representative person, that feels like the church has not visited.

4. This ministry of the church is a participation in the ministry of Jesus Christ. ‘He summons the church to engage in his ministry by witness, stewardship, and service.’⁷⁸ The whole direction of ministry must be correlative to the whole incarnational movement of Christ as described in the New Testament. He descends from heaven, incarnate, takes our sin on the cross, and ascends to the Father’s right hand. Ministry is not something in essence that emerges from below, from the democratic decision of the members of the church, but is a response to the call of Christ from above, recognised by the church. Ministry is representational of the church and of Jesus Christ its Lord. It must follow and signal his life and his ministry.

⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 73.

⁷⁶ Robert Hannaford, ‘Representation & the Theology of the Ministry’. *Ecclesiology* 1.2. (2005) 88.

⁷⁷ *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry, 1982-1990, Report on the Process & Responses.* Faith and Order Paper 149 (WCC, Geneva 1990) .21.

⁷⁸ Thomas Torrance, *Royal Priesthood. A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (T&T Clark Edinburgh 1993). 38.

A spirituality of disempowerment, and absence.

A theologian who has sought to develop a Trinitarian theology of the cross based upon the *paradidomai* (the giving up) of the Son to death is Hans Urs von Balthasar. In his book *Mysterium Paschale*, he draws attention to the tension of the double movement noted by Moltmann: on the one hand there is the active self-surrender of the Son, and on the other the passive acceptance of being handed over to judgment and death (Mark 14:41). Von Balthasar contends that the source of this handing over is the Father's decision to send the Son into a world of sin and death. To accept such a vocation does not exempt the son from the horror, loneliness and pain of being handed over to the power of darkness (Luke 22:53). Jesus' real identification with the plight of the sinner is not primarily in terms of the cry of dereliction (as Moltmann), but his entry into the abyss and silence of Holy Saturday.

Jesus' death is not the same as that of every other human. It is something unique, "expressed in the 'realisation' of all Godlessness, of all the sins of the world, now expressed as agony and a sinking down into the 'second death' or 'second chaos', outside of the world ordained from the beginning by God" (1990:52).

In utter passivity and by way of total identification with the sinner consumed by the wrath of God, Jesus is cut off from the living in the land of the dead. There is no triumphal entry into Hades to unlock the gates of hell and preach good news to the dead; instead only abandonment to the terrors and torments of isolation from the living God and the eternal darkness of hell. He experiences the full horror of hell in our place, both lifeless passivity and total rejection and abandonment. This is more apocalyptic than Moltmann. For Von Balthasar, Jesus experiences the full extent of the wages of sin, the hopelessness and helplessness of the sinner given over to death, and the full radicality of sin as alienation, enmity and hostility to God.

The biblical record about this time is over-emphasised by 1 Pet 3:18-20. This is a heavily disputed text. The older interpretation puts the timing of this preaching to disobedient spirits between Jesus death and resurrection. He descends to Hades, the temporary abode of the dead, and preaches to them, either announcing his victory or giving a second opportunity to repent and obey God. A more recent interpretation, followed, for instance,

by Dick France,⁷⁹ is that this occurs after the resurrection, and before the enthronement on high. Remembering we are dealing with a world view to which we no longer hold and that we are in the realm of Jewish apocalyptic, itself deeply problematic (Hades below the world, the heavens above), we should be cautious before using this to avoid the deeper theological point: until the resurrection, Christ was dead.

Therefore, putting aside a biblical interpretation that is at odds with a broader theological point, we can begin to understand this Holy Saturday period as one of waiting, of suffering, of disempowerment and absence. So, what might disengagement mean for us busy pastors in ministry today?

Holy Saturday has lost its significance for us. After a sad, yet confident, remembrance of Good Friday, Saturday becomes the day to do the shopping in readiness for Easter. There is the lamb to buy, the sermons to prepare, and, if it's a lovely Spring day, a walk in the sunshine perhaps. We lose the day, for it has no liturgy, it is deliberately a pause. We know what to do on Good Friday: we mourn, and we certainly know what to do on Easter Day: we rejoice. But the day in between? It's a day to forget really, and in so doing we lose the meaning of Easter.

R S Thomas has a poem which includes these lines

*Prompt me, O God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.*

The silence between the demand for crucifixion and the glorious cry of Alleluia is a yawning gap, a silence as significant as the song.

We must not be afraid of life's long waitings: the waiting for news, the waiting for a birth, the waiting at a loved one's death bed with the rattle in their throat, the waiting for our own death. Without the meaning of Holy Saturday, we collude with the impatient rush of a godless world that fills the silence with noise and activity lest it becomes fearful of the dread. How can we possibly bring people

⁷⁹ R France, 'Exegesis in Practice. Two Examples' 264-381 in *New Testament Interpretation* ed. Howard Marshall (Paternoster, Exeter 1979).

to a depth of faith if we have no time to listen, to wait, to be quiet? To teach people to wait, to wait before God, and to be a living example of it, is part of our calling as pastors.

Most of Jesus life was waiting: nine months from annunciation waiting to be born (as the medieval poet puts it, 'Heaven and Earth in little space'); thirty years waiting for baptism, anointing with power and ministry; then, at the end, six agonising hours waiting to die, each snatched breath a torment, a battle between the hunger for death's oblivion and body's refusal to go quietly into that good night; then 36 hours, perhaps a little more, of waiting in the thrall of death until the Spirit breaks its power and the dead body draws breath, the heart beats, the flesh transforms and a moment outside of history becomes history.

Learning to wait informs our pastoral practice. It tells us that we are not the Messiah, but mere women and men empowered by the same Spirit that gave life to the dead Son of God. Sometimes we need to wait, and sometimes our longed-for answers to prayer do not occur as we wish: the sick die, the rebellious rebel, the dead of heart remain cold, the awkward just become more obnoxious. The practice of waiting does not allow the disappointment to rob us of faith and the peace of Christ which passes all human understanding. Without it we remain shallow and victims of our own delusions of our greatness.

It is nice to be needed, to be busy, to have folk flatter us with their investiture of faith that we might come up with the answer to their problem. Few say, If you had a few moments, pastor'...more than likely they impress upon you that they need you now, it's urgent and only you will do. Few will ring to ask you to stop everything and pray... but that's what you are called to do first.

It is here that the timing of Holy Saturday takes on renewed significance. Jesus was buried in a hurry because the Sabbath was starting, and he remained in the tomb until after Sabbath was over ... it was early on the first day of the week. Sabbath rest, the principle of stopping, of not being useful, of waiting. We have reduced the Sabbath principle to a 'day off', a bastardized Sabbath. This is a secularized Sabbath, an excuse to get more done in the other six days because, having been nagged by our partners and, if we are fortunate, by those we serve, we discover that a break is healthful. We are more efficient, relationships get better, we are not so unpleasant to live with, and our tempers grow longer.

But this is not Sabbath. Sabbath is a waste of time. Eugene Peterson puts it like this: “Sabbath-keeping often feels like an interruption, an interference with our routines. It challenges assumptions we gradually build up that our daily work is indispensable in making the world go. And then we find it is not an interruption, but a more basic rhythmic measure that confirms and extends the basic beat. Every seventh day a deeper note is struck – an enormous gong whose deep sounds reverberate under and over and around the daily timpani percussions of evening/morning, evening/morning, evening/ morning; creation honoured and contemplated, redemption remembered and shared.”

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This is why your day off is not your only Sabbath. Yours is the same as everybody else’s: Sunday. If it has become just work, then you need a renewed perspective. True, you need to take a day free from church work as well, but it’s no substitute for Sabbath shared with everyone else. Sunday should not be filled with work. You also need a day to potter, be quiet, pray, catch up on the chores or visit the family. Without it, you’ll soon wither in spirit.

The principle needs extending, to give us uncluttered time, time to reflect, time to listen, time to shut up for once. Sabbath-keeping enables other people to get free from our infernal interfering in their lives all the time, and to learn what it is to depend on God rather than on us. Our pastoral care runs the danger of manipulative abuse of power, which Sabbath keeps at bay.

Calvin, that most austere of Reformers, whose theology informs the sabbatarianism of the dour Scots, led the good people of Geneva in prayer on a Sabbath morning, and then played skittles in the afternoon. He knew that Sabbath meant prayer, and orientation of life towards God; and play, an orientation towards others in joyful association. It is the way of being that Jesus exhibits: life lived with his eyes to heaven and eyes towards to the needy.

But, you say, there’s a million things to do, letters to write, phone calls to make, agendas to set, the sick to visit, the pagan to evangelise, the sermon to write. They all cry for your attention, but one thing is needful: to stop, and listen to God. It reminds you just

⁸⁰ E. Peterson, *Working the Angles. The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Eerdmans 1987) 70.

who God is, when everyone acts as if it's you. We are not full-time contemplatives, hermits or desert-dwellers. Our calling is to engagement, to ministry amongst others. But without this counterpoint of disengagement, what power we exercise becomes abusive, and even in our search for empowerment we become disempowered, whereas, when we seek the rhythm of regular disengagement, we find we are empowered by it. In our hunger for presence, we become spiritually absent, whereas in our periodic absence, we discover that it is not our presence which people find, but God's presence in us.

We know all this, of course, it's nothing new. But just as we need the regular remembrance of our faith in bread and wine and never grow beyond it, so we need a regular reminder to quit, stop what we are doing, be quiet and listen. Holy Saturday in ordinary, heaven in the silence, new life in the midst of death and decay.

ANCIENT-FUTURE FAITH

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What does it mean to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ? How are we to 'do church' in the 21st century? If modernity is looking threadbare, what might it mean to bear witness to the gospel in a post-modern world?

Many have cause to be grateful for the work of Robert Webber. Well known for his books on worship, it was Webber who coined the term 'blended worship' as a response to the so-called worship wars which were, and still are in some places, splitting congregations. Blended worship is a win-win approach to diversity in the local church where a variety of worship styles are woven into Sunday worship. In what is a natural development from his life's work of helping Evangelicals to enrich their worship,⁸¹ he has

⁸¹ R E Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Introduction* (Zondervan, revised 1994); *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship*, (Hendrickson, 1994); *Worship as a Verb*, 2007 and the eight volume *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Hendrickson, 1993).