

LET'S SHARE OUR TREASURE

This is a plea that we take deliberate steps to share our Bible's treasure with our communities. It is a plea particularly to those of us who are part of rural or edge-of-rural churches, where the local economy has been reliant on land (or sea) and where viability and sustainability are growing concerns (pun intended). Livelihood for family farmers (and fishers), the viability of local communities and sustainable fish stocks and soil and water use are increasingly in question. And now food justice and supply is taking centre stage as a global concern. We need to share our biblical book of books because it is, in fact, full of rural stories and sustainable wisdom.

Assumptions are made about the Bible which have functioned to fence it off and shut people out from hearing its life-giving voices. Part of the Bible's credibility problem has been that it has been interpreted predominantly with one voice, and that this voice, in the words of one Chinese writer, "not only claims to provide the answer but defines the question too!"¹ A rich mix of narratives and traditions has been drawn under one all-encompassing meta-narrative, namely, Christian redemption. "A thin-sliced understanding" is how Kwok describes it, unable to make connections outside the Western context that has driven this salvation meta-narrative yet, in the way of imperialism, this Western world-view has presented it as universal truth. It is not that this perspective is wrong – far from it. It is just that, as a solo voice and excluding others, it has put restrictions on opportunities for the Bible's rich mix to speak to different people. There has been an issue of relevance, because the voices that might speak to the huge variety of concerns we live with have not been recognised. The Bible contains the very kind of confusion and uncertainty we know every day and the conflicts and ambiguity that are a fact of life for us, but a 'one track' approach to biblical interpretation has hidden this away. It has also blinkered us to the underlying 'ruralness' in the Bible's texts.

Many rural people, and others, have rejected the Bible's answers in the manner they have been promoted – or have simply not been interested in them – because their own questions prove hard to relate to the key question on offer: 'are you saved?' It has not been a straightforward step from their pressing problems to the usual matters under discussion. I would venture to suggest that a form of trickle-down theory has been operating implicitly, namely, that if the issue of personal sinfulness is sorted other aspects of life will come right too. But when, for example, one is looking for clues for how to farm faithfully, in terms of integrity in economics, ethics and land care, there is immediacy about the need for practical answers. There is a 'poverty of spirit' that thirsts for direction and purpose here and now. Faced with a confusion of decisions as self-employed owner-operators on the land, with strong voices telling them there is no alternative (TINA) to what dominant economic players put before them, the spiritual need cannot easily wait. In any case, our poverty of spirit *need* not wait. We have a treasure at hand that can help us look at these very issues which, for rural people, are a matter of viability and sustainability into the future.

A word of caution however. To engage with the Bible with a view to gaining insights to practical issues of life and livelihood, we must be ready for surprises. We also need to be willing to speak of 'perhaps' and 'maybe' as we debate our way through to hearing God's word for our context. When we are accustomed to clear pronouncements about what a particular text means, it may be an uncomfortable experience to start a process of conversation with a text and not have the security of somebody taking charge of where we are going. We will need to trust the Spirit. And we will

¹ Kwok Pui Lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World", in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, R.S. Sugirtharajah ed., SPCK, London: 1991, pp.302-3

need to consider the prospect that there is more chance of it being God's word for our situation if we put ourselves and our situation into dialogue with the Bible text we are reading and let the process produce the results.

Walter Brueggeman provides substantial grounds for trusting a 'conversation' approach to the Bible. He quotes Jewish critic George Steiner who writes: "It is the Hebraic intuition that God is capable of all speech acts except that of monologue, which has generated our acts of reply, of questioning, and counter-creation."² "Dialogue," says Brueggeman, "...is not merely a strategy, but it is a practice that is congruent with our deepest nature, made as we are in the image of a dialogic God."³ Hearing the word of God is always a relational matter; knowing God is a matter of relationship, as Jesus tells us again and again.

This dialogical approach is what I urge us, as church, to make available to ourselves and the people we live among, troubled as we are by what is happening around us and not sure how to move forward faithfully. I imagine conversations happening between text and context. I imagine life-giving conversations as life and livelihood issues meet biblical narratives, and new options break the closure of past and present. I imagine conversations in which texts of faith help us identify and challenge the death-dealing trends and forces in what we are undergoing at this point in our planet's and our species' history. The purpose is, in practical terms, sustainable living. In spiritual terms, it is life in all its fullness, living in the perspective of eternity.

The majority of our rural people have rejected the Bible for not helping them, or they have ignored it because it seems to be about something they cannot relate to. So long as they remain in the dark about this book of many books, with many voices and stories, and an authority that arises, not from a stand alone infallibility, but from its faithfulness to life's confusion, open-endedness and mystery, these people will be denied the opportunity to explore a treasure trove of stories to interweave with our own stories. What we could be doing together is "theology that is truly meaningful, rather than an excess of metaphorical afterthought..., deeply engaged in the problems that effectively determine our lives."⁴

To engage with the Bible we must be living, active subjects, not passive receptacles, and that means we bring the perspectives and assumptions, the cultures and histories of our context. These affect how we read and how the biblical text reads us. If God speaks through this engagement, it is in the conversation that happens as we and the text 'talk together', interweaving our story in a retelling of the textual narrative, thereby bringing it "closer to where we are, so that the Bible can surface among us"⁵. If biblical interpretation were a singular process it would have been a closed book centuries ago. Indeed the narratives and strands of teaching that both Hebrew and Christian scripture contain would not have made it into written form if they were not already speaking to people in their varied contexts of place and time. "Reading the Bible ... is rather like pulling up a chair at a feast that has been under way for some time."⁶

² George Steiner, *Real Presences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1989, p.225

³ Walter Brueggeman, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London: 2007, p.73

⁴ Phillip Goodchild, "Debt, Epistemology and Ecotheology," *Ecotheology* 9.2 (2004) p.173.

⁵ Jione Havea, "Is there a home for the Bible in the Postmodern World?" *Ecumenical Studies*, Vol 42 No. 4 Fall 2007, p.558.

⁶ Mary Chilton Callaway, "Exegesis as Banquet: Reading Jeremiah with the Rabbis", in *A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. Richard D. Weis and David M. Carr, p.220

So let's open up this feast to all our friends around us, to all who care about how we treat people and the land and sea we work with. Making Jesus Christ known is one way of expressing our mission in being church. The invitation to join in conversation with Christian Scripture is an invitation to people to meet a person who knew first-hand the suffering and challenges, as well as the joys and beauty, of living with the land – Jesus of Nazareth himself. His context was rural; he lived on the margins of a society whose powers-that-be took his life. And his primary circle of concern was the *anawim*, the people of the land, who were getting poorer and poorer under a regime that was at the same time claiming to bring peace and prosperity to the world. Peace through the threat of violence, prosperity through an economic system of winners and losers – peace that is no peace, prosperity for some on top of poverty for many. This was a society that had major issues about food supply and food justice. For Jesus, food was a constant theme and a recurring image of the kingdom of God. Here again, the Bible's voices are speaking to our context.

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