

## **A Theology of Encounter**

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Pass the parcel is an excellent ice breaker – at least for children’s parties. Properly timed it serves a number of purposes simultaneously. While the parcel is being passed, everyone who is not holding it has time to get their bearings socially. Who are my friends here? Possibly not the person on my left, but maybe the one on my right. When the parcel lands on me I need to shed a layer of wrapping as quickly as possible while at the same time hoping that I’ll be lucky enough to land on the last layer and take home the much coveted prize, usually rather small and somewhat disappointing given the collective effort involved in unwrapping it. It is also a game of calculation and forethought, so it helps to know the music that is being played while the parcel is going round. Knowing the music allows you to control the game to a certain extent. You know when the pauses are likely to come and can time your own hold on the diminishing parcel accordingly.

All of this supplies us with a conceptual matrix for thinking about the Church and about why we do theology. The Church is the context in which theology takes shape, but its own life is also shaped by that theology. Theology, once known as the queen of the sciences, is about unwrapping layers of knowledge pertaining to God, over a period of time, and in rhythm with a particular kind of music. It is therefore inherently relational and dialectic. It cannot be done in a social or intellectual vacuum. Just as the idea of being a solitary Christian is itself something of an oxymoron, it is difficult, if not impossible, to be a solitary theologian. We need to hear and engage with the voices of others in all their diversity and find ways of discovering more and more common theological ground, more and more ways of meeting each other in God if we are to discern what is true. So it follows that if we are to make sense and meaning of our common quest for a deeper knowledge of God we have to learn to meet others and do their theology with them. The greater the diversity of approaches to how we think about God, the greater the truth. This is what happens in good question and answer sessions at the end of a speaker’s address during a Modern Church conference. We encounter new bits of knowledge which fill gaps in our individual understandings of God and so make sense of our tradition.

This is a liberating experience because these minor epiphanies move us on as a theological community. We ride, momentarily, on the wind of the Spirit, on a dynamic truth. We are ‘set free’ because the kind of truth encountered together will inevitably take us all into a different conceptual place. It will change us as a Church. The more we embrace others in our openness to learning from them, the more the truth which is of God can in turn embrace us. This mutual embrace between us, and between us and God, allows us to do theology from a different conceptual place. Learning in a variety of ways becomes something more than a purely rational exercise, having to do with an object of enquiry and with propositional truth, by which I mean what is identifiable as fact, rather than sensed as

mystery. It becomes subjective, having to do with relationship and at the same time with the unknowability of God and, ultimately, of truth as a complete or composite whole.

Subjectivity is a potentially frightening word for liberals, not so much because of its Barthian connotation, but because it can also suggest exclusivity, a God and a truth which only pertain to a particular 'class' of Christian, involving a conditional belonging which has to be signed up to on the basis of a single non-negotiable understanding of truth. But the kind of subjectivity we experience in conference is not like this because it engages the whole person through the mind and through what might be described as the 'ground' or base of who we are. This happens when the work we do in the conference room bears fruit in the Eucharist which takes place next door, and in the silence which surrounds and inhabits all our other times of worship.

In learning from this deeper place, we encounter God at a deeper level. We begin to do theology in a contemplative dimension and our learning bears its first fruits in the commonality of worship. Through worship, theology becomes a relational exercise, one which involves the dynamic of the Spirit and ourselves in relation to one another. We experience the Spirit subjectively in the individual friendships we have with one another and in working together towards a common understanding for our future. So our thinking work, our theology, ought also to feed our affections and strengthen the bonds of peace. Done in this way, theology is an exercise in finding common ground in the area of understanding, leading to the revelation of what we might call truth.

Truth is what makes meaning out of doctrine and so allows for the conversion of belief into something resembling faith. A worshipping community which is doing theology by engaging with both the rational and the intuitive is doing contemplative theology. This is the kind of theology which will be a vehicle for allowing the dynamic truth of God to enliven the faith of subsequent generations. Much of what we saw and heard at this year's conference was grounded in a contemplative thought process. While challenging us as passive contributors to the destruction which is being wrought on our planet, it also gave us hope. It freed us into a way of thinking which takes us into the realm of the subjective. If we can sustain our hold on this subjective thinking, and on the prayer which proceeds from it, we shall be in a position to act and speak prophetically.

We saw, in one of the films shown to us, how faith communities hold the key to the future when it comes to how governments act, or fail to act, with regard to climate change. This is where faith, as opposed to belief, plays a vital part. Faith which proceeds from a vital and living truth and which is grounded in an equally vital and ongoing tradition has something to offer to a despairing world. It offers a way to think and act subjectively so as to allow for peace with God. Thinking subjectively, in the way we did at this year's conference, allows us to rediscover truth, as well as tradition, as something entirely new in the present, but enriched, or leavened, by the wisdom of the past. If we can model prophetic witness from this conceptual space we shall have a life-giving truth to pass on to subsequent generations of Modern Church and to the wider world.

