

# WORK IN PROGRESS

A REPORT ON ON-GOING WORK IN THE FIELD OF BIBLICAL PERFORMANCE CRITICISM.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since January 2017, I have been leading and working with a small group of parishioners in Gloucestershire, England, on the exegesis of Gospel texts. By using a methodology which I am developing through this work with them and based on BPC principles<sup>1</sup>, this is a report of one workshop which had particularly fruitful results. All participants were adults, many of them are professionals, working or retired. They included a mental-health care worker, an engineer, a retired senior ranking soldier, a university lecturer, a secondary school teacher and two housewives. Their ages ranged from early 40 to 92. Some of the group have tertiary education, at least one of which is to doctorate level.

My own particular interest is in the comedy to be found in the gospels. The role and nature of comedy as well as its playing out in the gospels underlies all my work as researcher and priest.

The two following reports relate to a single evening's work looking at two passages from Matthew's Gospel. The passages are dealt with separately (parts one and two). The summary and conclusion draw on the exegesis of both passages.

## PART ONE

The text for the first discussion was Matthew 17:14-20, taken from the NRSV. The text below is exactly what the group were given to work with.

Matthew 17: 14-20

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<sup>1</sup> The full details of the methodology that I am using are not given here as they are under development and will, I hope, be the framework for a further publication.

When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, and said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic<sup>1</sup> and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.' Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse/depraved/distorted/misled generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with/endure you? Bring him here to me.' And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' He said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there", and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'

<sup>1</sup>The word in Greek here literally means 'moonstruck' what we once called a 'lunatic', i.e., someone affected by the moon's phases. What does the use of the word 'epileptic' tell you about the work of the translator?

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used throughout all of the workshops is to interrogate the scene as if it were going to be staged in order to uncover aspects which may not otherwise emerge from a 'print-culture' attitude. This involved articulating thoughts about the physical actions that might have taken place. At several points in the workshop the narrative was physically demonstrated by me to explore the possibilities within the text. A particular terminology was introduced, that of 'standing up the text' whereby instead of reading the words as a text in two dimensions, i.e., flat on the page, we referred to making the text 'stand up' to become a three-dimensional script. This proved difficult at first because it is the trained instinct of many church-goers, especially those with any academic training, is to use the tools of literary analysis. Thus, at times when analysis of the text as a *script* was proving difficult to work through, the immediate recourse was to look at the meanings of words or 'spread out' into theological discourse. At first, this was a distraction from the job of 'performing the text'. However, as discussed further below, it became a positive asset when the piece was looked at as a whole, that is, as an acted piece with theological ramifications. The roundedness of the perceptivity of the group became apparent when all dynamics, BPC and print-culture, plus personal experiences, were taken into account.

## DRAMATIC DISCUSSIONS

### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

We began by identifying the people who appear in the scene. This was done by reading through the passage and listing the characters in order of appearance. Whilst this sounds like stating the obvious

(always a good thing to do anyway) it also identified several groups that were not immediately obvious from a 'flat' reading of the text. Thus we have

- the crowd (audience 1),
- the father of the boy,
- the boy, (there was a discussion about the age of this 'character' but an actual age was not decided upon other than 'pre-adolescent')
- the group of disciples unable to cure the boy (audience 2),
- the disciples who were with Him when approached by the man (audience 3)
- Jesus
- possibly the mother of the boy

#### THE PRESENTATION OF THE BOY

A discussion developed re the composition of the crowd. We wanted to include idle onlookers, merchants, women, Romans and children; in short a typical cross-section of Judean public life.

The split group of disciples (audience 2 and 3) derived from the development of the man coming into the street to seek out Jesus to have his son cured when the disciples he had consulted couldn't do it; a sort of 'seeking out the organ grinder, not the monkey' attitude. It was thought that some of the disciples had remained with Jesus while another group had gone off to do ministry. This was in accord with an understanding that the context of this passage was after the commissioning of the Twelve in Matthew 10. This itself evoked a discussion about the veracity and value of the given (i.e. written) chronology of the narrative.

The scene was imagined as one where the crowd developed, as crowds do, from the sudden appearance of a distraught man, bringing his son with him and followed in haste by the hapless disciples. The age of the boy was assumed to be pre-adolescent. The act of kneeling itself was a spectacle, altering the choreographical dynamic between the crowd(s) and Jesus, all standing and the man kneeling. It was discussed as to whether the 'failed' disciples at this point looked after the boy or perhaps his unmentioned mother was there with him. This developed further into a theological discussion as to why the disciples could not heal the boy. A minor discussion about the cultural *affect* of a grown man kneeling in public ensued together with how his despair would have been made apparent – weeping, distress, anger, frustration and so on.

The reaction of the failed disciples gave rise to some humour. How did they feel about being failures? Did they shuffle their feet, blame one another, appeal, argue...? An interesting moment of very black humour also arose at the order with which the boy first threw himself into the fire and then into the water!

#### THE REACTION OF JESUS (1)

The script which the group had showed several possibilities for the words spoken by Jesus (see above). These variations are taken from different versions of the Bible and from Bauer's lectionary of Greek.<sup>2</sup> The words ( faithless and perverse/depraved/distorted/misled ) all seemed harsh except 'misled' which raised the option of 'misled by whom?' Whichever word was used the tenor was that of anger and frustration. This itself raised a wide discussion about the temperament of Jesus as a very human man. We then briefly discussed the view of the Old Testament 'God of Wrath' which seems to be at odds with the concept of an all compassionate Christ. The hymn *Love Divine All Loves Excelling* was cited – 'Jesus thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art' was contrasted with Jesus as a man capable of anger. Other instances of his anger were evinced, notably the cleansing of the Temple. Suddenly the God of the Old Testament seemed present in the anger of Jesus in the New – and possibly for similar reasons.

Aspects of good leadership were discussed. The management concept of 'never telling off subordinates in public' was raised and it was amusingly decided that Jesus had never read these!

A comparison was drawn with King Lear, beating his head as he says 'Lear, Lear, Lear! // Beat at this gate that let thy folly in // And thy dear judgement out' (Act 1: scene 4). The use of monosyllables as indicative of emotion was introduced and Jesus was imagined bashing his head against a brick wall or otherwise being utterly exasperated with His disciples. This of course works for words spoken in English but words with 'd' 't' and hard 'p' sounds also express emotion, particularly anger. In this case the Greek words *apistos* and *diestrammene* fulfil this function. Therefore, in English or Greek, the emotion being expressed by Jesus is intense. This inevitably gave rise to two further discussions, the humanity of Jesus and the language(s) He spoke. His thought processes around enduring the disciples lead to amusing discussion about the length of His time with the disciples. On the one hand three years was evidently too long in this particular instance while on the other hand He said he

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur*, 2nd ed., and augmented (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).



looking relieved or wondering still how it was done, the father being overwhelmed with joy and delight, tears of joy streaming down his face even as it shone with gratitude. The form that gratitude took was discussed, more kneeling at Jesus' feet and more being lifted up to stand. Hugs, handshakes, amazement, laughter. The boy's reaction to being well – perhaps unable to understand what all the fuss was about. The presence of celebration and comedy – all ending well – as symptomatic of the presence of the Messiah and the coming of the Kingdom of God was discussed<sup>3</sup>.

#### THE REACTION OF JESUS (4)

We discussed too how Jesus might have felt. Instead of His going off to discuss a 'case history' with the disciples (failed or otherwise) we decided He would have stayed with the celebrations. A wonderfully joyful moment was considered in which Jesus beamed with pleasure, obviously very content indeed with what He had just done – 'I did that!' We remembered God at creation saying 'it was good' and God saying of His Son 'I am *well* pleased' (how differently that phrase would sound if God had said 'very' instead of 'well'). This was the creative God at work and this recognition of the humanity-divinity of Christ was enjoyed by the group.

#### PUBLIC MINISTRY

The healing took place in public and this was made all the more evident by the identification of *setting the scene* surrounded by a crowd. The public spectacle is *intrinsically theatrical*, a *sight* to be *seen* in which those who may not have been able to hear what was going on would have been able to understand *from actions and expressions alone* what the emotions and consequences were that were being generated.

The effect of this public ministry is several-fold, not least of which are the following.

- It is the public ministry of Jesus that announces the presence of the Kingdom of God.
- The healing and the subsequent festivity are indicators of the Messiah's presence.
- The healing of the boy re-introduces him into public society from which he would have been excluded by his illness.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the presence of joy as indicative of the presence of the Messiah see Raymond Edward Brown, ed. *The Gospel according to John. [Vol. 2], 13-21*. The Anchor Bible 29A. (London: Chapman, 1971), 1035-6 and Craig S. Keener *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 1004; also Stanley Frost, 'Who Were the Heroes? An Exercise in Bi-testamentary Exegesis, with Christological Implications' in L. D. Hurst, and N. T. Wright, eds. *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

- This is also true for his father who evidently was desperate and not able to function socially because of his boy's illness.

Thus Christ is seen to be restoring community to individual and vice versa in a creative act of healing.

#### PRIVATE DISCOURSE

We then looked at the last part of the story in which the disciples and Jesus discuss the events. Why the disciples had not been able to heal was the subject of a discussion about the nature of authority and how it cannot be assumed but has to be handed down or on. This raised questions about how the disciples learnt and felt in the company of Christ. It also led to questions of apostolic succession, the nature of ordination and the reality of discipleship.

#### ETHICS OF TRANSLATION

A very moot point was raised about the use of the word 'epileptic'. The translation is evidently a twentieth century interpretation of a first century work. We considered other words which may have had a different effect and put a different skew on the attitude to 'unwellness'. Were the symptoms described by the father typical of epilepsy or could they also be applied as symptoms of autism where people have no concept of pain (which would explain the boy throwing himself into fire)? Why use 'epilepsy' when 'mental illness' or other such term might have been used? Was 'epilepsy' used because it was a twentieth century way of explaining something that in Jesus' day was set down to a demon? We discussed the Greek meaning of the word as set out in the footnote to the passage (see above) meaning 'moonstruck', an idea that gives rise to our word 'lunatic'. 'Moonstruck', it was felt, was a more compassionate term. A further idea was posed, that of 'lost to himself' which was satisfactory to many as being less pejorative or pre-defining.

#### PART TWO

Immediately following on from the above transaction, we looked at the passage below specifically to find the comedy in the text. This was a deliberate intention as this is the essence of my personal academic work. Using the principles of interpretation that were exercised in the above passage we located the encounter between Jesus and Peter into the various appropriate contexts and then

turned the perspectives around in order to look more closely at what we saw. The following passage was given to the group, including the footnotes.

Matthew 18.21 -26

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came/approached and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church<sup>1</sup> sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven<sup>2</sup> times.

<sup>1</sup>the word translated church here is 'brother'

<sup>2</sup>Some manuscripts read 'seventy times seven

#### LOCATION AND PRESENCE

Our first task was to 'populate the stage'. The passage immediately preceding this section has all the disciples together. It was imagined that Jesus and the disciples were walking in distinct groups and that at this point Peter was not in the group talking with Jesus but with the main body of disciples. An argument arises, perhaps related to the teaching that Jesus had immediately been giving on forgiveness.

It was asked 'what do we know about Peter?' to use his character to determine what may have given rise to his question. Understanding Peter to be impetuous, feisty, stubborn, a little short on both temper and brains perhaps, we imagined that Peter would have had some sort of argument with a group of his fellows prompting him, in temper, to tell them that he'd go and ask Jesus who perhaps, was talking to John (as He always was!). We considered too that Peter may not have been asking in temper for his own benefit but may have been asking on behalf of more timid members of the group who wanted to know what Jesus had meant but didn't want to either interrupt Him or look stupid. The first way worked best because we were specifically looking for humour in this passage and Peter's annoyance was part of the comedy. Thus, his asking 'Lord, if one of my brothers sins against me, how often should I forgive?' is accompanied with a backward glance at disciples who are groaning, throwing up their hands in despair/annoyance/ groaning or gesticulating somehow to indicate what they think of Peter. Peter's determination to 'sort it' rests on him thinking he's right of course.<sup>4</sup>

Peter asks 'as many as...' implying that seven has already been reached by his fellows or by he himself. It also suggests that Peter struggles with counting; 'seven' requires two hands!

Jesus' reply is teasing we thought. Peter is a fisherman, prone, as fishermen are, to exaggerate but perhaps, in Peter's particular case, not so good at the maths needed to calculate the response that Jesus gives – time to take the shoes and socks off and use the toes. With a wry smile,

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<sup>4</sup> This interpretation chimes to some extent with that put forward by Robert H. Gundry in *Peter, False Disciple and Apostate according to Saint Matthew*, 2015 ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015) 36-7.

Jesus is pushing Jesus to another limit of forgiveness. The disciples meanwhile have a variety of reactions from astonishment to 'told you so'.

The story doesn't finish here though for we looked again at *who* was there among the disciples that could count and what effect the words of Jesus would/could have on them. Matthew obviously could count but the first name to emerge was Judas, the keeper of the company's purse. I gave the group Matthew 27:3 to think on, 'Judas repented'. This retrospective put the episode into a very different and very poignant light. Having heard these words of Christ, could he be assured of his own forgiveness for his own very serious sin? The comedy of the encounter with Peter emphasised the teaching on forgiveness which was magnified all the more by reflecting on the possible presence of Judas and on subsequent events. It was a moment which gave hope as well as illuminating the characters of Peter and Jesus.

#### OBSERVATIONS ON THE USE OF BPC TECHNIQUES

Whilst any bible discussion could have given rise to some aspects of this particular exploration of the passage, the benefits and new insights come, I believe, in the following.

*The distress of the father* is made all the more pertinent and poignant by preparing the scene to be acted. The contrasting joy when the son is healed is highlighted and intensified by acting out the scene. This juxtaposition of despair with joy occurs frequently in the gospels and may be seen as indicative of the presence of the Messiah. The sequence of fear followed by joy is, of course, a pattern identified in the relief theory of comedy. Equally, the teasing of Peter may be described as evidence of the superiority theory of comedy in action.<sup>5</sup>

*The discovery of the humanity of Jesus*, not only His compassion but also His anger, exasperation, annoyance, grace, sense of fun, sense of Himself and His divinity finding expression in the healing of the boy and the giving the boy back to his father, his family, his community. One member of the group said that so often the divinity of God is focussed upon but that this method of exegesis helps to bring into focus the humanity of Christ. In this narrative we discovered a Christ who was in the act of creating as God does, whilst yet presenting, so to speak, a very human and compassionate face. The role and purpose of anger, righteous or otherwise, is illuminated by seeing Christ as capable of

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<sup>5</sup> Much has been written on the theories of comedy; for a brief introduction see Melissa A. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Also, John Morreall, ed. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, Suny Series in Philosophy. New York: State University of New York, 1987, or, dare I say? Google theories of comedy.

expressing anger. The anger of God is seen in a different light because of seeing Jesus expressing anger; it is not something to be feared so much as something to be understood, that is, at what *exactly* was the anger being expressed? All of our human experience is within the spiritual purview of Christ, not least those found in the wide scope of comedy's remit, from low earthy humour to the cerebrality of in-jokes. I suggest that it is in the community brought into existence by the act of watching a performance that the Gospel message makes incarnate the humanity and divinity of Christ and of ourselves. The late John Russell Brown, a remarkable and reflective thinker on the role of theatre, writes of any theatre experience:

The odds are high that ...memories will not be concerned with verbal statements or arguments, or the meaning of the play: the primary memory will be of performance, of an actor's presence and what he or she does. The words of the play-text may not have registered at all.

Even when a few words are securely held in the memory, the manner of speaking them, the situation in which they were spoken, and the speaker's commitment to them are inseparable from those words and tend to dominate their effect. Performance can turn familiar words into extraordinary expressions of deep and exact feelings...

What words can do when they are part of a theatre performance is too complicated and variable for the *reader of a text* to comprehend easily.<sup>6</sup> (Italics mine.)

This is certainly borne out by the experience of working with this small group on these two passages. What Brown is perhaps not attuned to is the experience of the Christian when dealing with the words of Christ, words which bring life in all its fullness.

*The public nature of the healing event* is made very apparent by staging the scene in a way that a private or cerebrally-focussed reading would not afford. As commented on above, this has theological and social ramifications which opened to the group in the course of seeing the words come to life.

*The sense of festivity* discovered, as it were, between the two words 'instantly' and 'then' are made *spectacularly* evident when performed. It is impossible when performing this narrative to go immediately from public healing to private teaching/debriefing session without giving the impression of a Christ who is aloof and uncaring. There *has* to be a social release of tension, a catharsis and celebration by all who took part and witnessed the event; to do otherwise would be curmudgeonly.

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<sup>6</sup> John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare and the Theatrical Event*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 1-2.

*The immediacy of the events* was intensified by preparing the scenes for acting even though everyone except myself as facilitator stayed in their seats. This is a new-to-each-other group and it can easily be seen that soon, as they learn to trust each other and their instincts, they will be 'up on stage'.

#### SUMMARY

The workshop dis-covered aspects of the narratives that could not have been so readily identified by a solitary reading or by a group reading which concentrated on the words without regard to the attendant actions. This particularly applies to those matters which words do not reveal, the unspoken matters of mood and tone, the non-verbal communications and the silences, the choreography of a scene which has theological implications such as the one-to-one, face-to-face relationship with Christ. Another theological aspect is the implications for Christology of a very human Christ, one who expresses frustration and anger as well as compassion.

#### CONCLUSION

The use of biblical performance principles in the context of group bible study proved beneficial to all participants as a way of sharing in exegesis and opening theological considerations across a wide spectrum of topics (namely, Christology, the nature of evil, the nature of communities – both social and church – the ethics of translation and the presence of comedy as a manifestation of the presence of the Messiah). With some guidance in regard to scholarship (e.g. different meanings of words, cultural matters – were women allowed to be present in the street?) and matters of stage-craft, the group and the individuals benefitted from encountering the personality of Jesus, framing Him in contexts of group leader, rabbi, compassionate social being and friend who had/has a robust and fun relationship with those who follow Him.