CROSS Purposes

Issue 15

2008 Retrospective

Contributors revisit the issues discussed throughout 2008

in service — CHRISTINA ROWNTREE

through a glass — WES CAMPBELL

CROSS Purposes

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A forum for theological dialogue

YOU HAVE IN YOUR HANDS (or on your screen) the 14th edition of *Cross Purposes*. The word is spreading about the quality of our little rag, and so we are glad to welcome many new readers from Queensland, New South Wales, South Oz, Western Oz and the Northern Territory. We are really chuffed that you chose to join our conversation.

This edition contains a veritable feast of "wisdom" which, according to Katharine Massam's article, may be defined as the integration of individual "factoids" or articles of "knowledge" into more whole lives—"whole" because such lives are open to the movement of God's Spirit in and through all of life's happenings. Katharine's article reflects upon the way in which the Theological College's "Scholar on the Road" programme seeks to nurture such wisdom in both the teachers and the taught. There is extraordinary

In this Issue

Letters 3

In Service 5
"On the Road", by Katharine Massam

Through a Glass Darkly 8
"To Be, Or…", by Kim Groot

Double Take 12
by Hilary Howes

On Areopagus Hill 13
"What the Church Proclaims"
by Peter Blackwood

op. cit. 17
"Particular Sin—Particular Saviour"
by Craig Thompson

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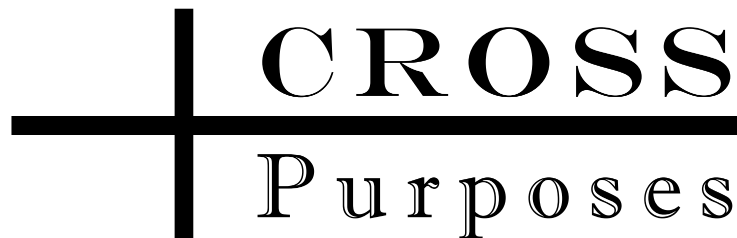
value, she says, in scholars getting out of the traditional classroom to mix it with other learning contexts. There they may learn that the road, and the people encountered on it, may have at least as much to teach as the library. In turn, the people they meet may discover that scholars have a pilgrimage wisdom themselves, honed through years of unique and sometimes difficult exploration. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* comes to mind…

Kim Groot converses with another great work of literature in her meditation upon death and grief. Hamlet famously equivocates on whether "to be, or not to be", choosing to live only because he fears what may await him beyond death even more that he fears his current circumstances. Kim reflects upon the nature of death as an event which we, as individual centres of consciousness, can never in fact experience: death is that "far country from which no traveller ever returns". In that sense, death is something that is universal; and yet we experience the grief of a loved one's death in a very personal and particular way. In what way does the resurrection of Jesus, then, comfort the bereaved? Not because it promises some kind of continuation of what is familiar to us in some better country. Rather, the resurrection assures us that while we may be lost to one another and, indeed, to our own selves in death, God remembers us. In Jesus we die with the Son of God and are therefore welcomed into the re/membering of the Father in the Spirit who binds them together. Such re/membering or reconstitution is what we mean by "resurrection", and it is a hope that only Christians may proclaim.



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The risen, crucified Jesus is present when the story of *his* gracious and forgiving return to *his* persecutors opens up *for us today* the possibility that we too might turn in grace and forgiveness to those at our left and right, and they to us. Just so, the body of Christ, broken and given to us, recreates *us* as "the Body of Christ", and we discover Jesus as our saviour. Such salvation identifies sin in the act of surpassing it—a very different scenario from that implied by bald definitions of sin and saviours, however theologically correct.

Well might we pray, then, that by the grace of God in Christ we may we know, and become, such sin-surpassing forgiveness in the healing of life he has given us. We shall then have met and dealt with the sin and salvation themselves, and not their doctrinal shadows.

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Notes

[1]From Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon 1996).

[2]Peter's address is very general—to the "entire house of Israel". This scarcely does justice to the original situation; "Israel" in Peter's sermon refers to those who, because of their status in the community, "stand for" all of Israel in a representative sense.

And then Jesus responds:

> 3. Though *thou* hast left me and wandered away, Chosen the darkness instead of the day; Though *thou* art covered with many a stain, Though *thou* hast wounded me oft and again: Though *thou* hast followed thy wayward will…

Christians are familiar with this way of thinking but, when we give it a bit of thought, the suggestion that *I* am guilty of the crucifixion is an odd one. And it doesn't help to muse that, "Well, I too probably *would* have demanded the crucifixion, or run away, or driven the nails, had I been there". There is nothing much to be said theologically or ethically for what I "would" do—whether good or bad—if I had the chance. The power of Peter's words resides in the link between what *has* happened and the involvement of *those to whom he speaks*. "Jesus is risen" has its most pressing significance for those who have his blood on their hands. In this sense, for *them*, "there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which [you] must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

This being the case, we might well imagine that believing (or not believing) in the presence of the risen, crucified Jesus, *today*, has something to do with the blood *we* have on *our* hands—whether literally or metaphorically. And it has something to do with forgiveness given, or withheld, for the spilling of that blood *by the one whose blood it was*. To reduce it to the barest possible declaration: There is no forgiveness, and no reconciliation with God, and so no resurrection, if there is no coming together of people who are at enmity with each other—victims and oppressors, however complexly those identities might be intertwined; this is what the resurrection of Jesus "means", and this is where "sin" and "saviour" cease as ideas and become realities for us.

"Jesus saves us from sin" is a pointer to the necessity of the startling injustice of grace in the reconciling of divided humankind to itself and to God. "Jesus saves" declares that there is no peace with justice, no righteous vengeance, for this is not how the crucified Jesus deals with his executioners. Peace—healing, wholeness, salvation—requires a merciful setting aside of otherwise righteous claims against our persecutors. "Sin" and "salvation" only become visible in this unexpected, undeserved and yet world-changing realization.

The reported response of the people to Peter's sermon is most likely hopelessly idealized and exaggerated, but this doesn't negate the point. The good news is not that we are forgiven—or not merely that. It is rather that it is forgiveness, and not vengeance, which brings into being that justice and peace we so desperately seek in our righteous retaliations.

In different ways, Peter Blackwood and Craig Thompson respond to the "progressive" version of the faith proposed in our last edition by David Merritt. Peter reminds us that what makes us Christian is not so much our capacity to create a "new faith" within our own time and culture, as an ongoing commitment to engaging that context according to the way and wisdom of the apostles. Christians are committed to imaginative communication, certainly. But in all our efforts to understand and be understood, Christians are *not* free to abandon the normativity of the proclamation we have in the Bible.

Craig Thompson then reflects upon the unhelpful ways in which both "sin" and "salvation" are abstracted into irrelevance by some. A more faithfully Christian theology, he argues, adheres to the concreteness and particularity of Peter's Pentecost sermon, which names an *actual* evil (the crucifixion of Jesus) by *actual* people (Peter's listeners) and then posits the possibility of repentance and forgiveness by the very one *against* whom these sins are committed. According to Craig, we should always treat both sin and salvation as real, concrete, events in the midst of our actual lives. Apart from this, the words are indeed meaningless.

A letter from Bruce Barber is also featured. Letters are good. They let us know what you are thinking, which helps the conversation along.

Whose Christianity?

In his personal discoveries entitled Alternatives to Traditional Christian Thought*, (CP 13) David Merritt admits the possibility that one of his observations might turn out to be a "category mistake". There may be more than one of David's discoveries to which this helpful phrase may be attached.*

Of particular significance is the oft repeated embarrassment on the part of those who call themselves ‘"progressive", namely that much despised Christian orthodoxy ("regressive" Christianity?) appears to claim that "Jesus is the only way to God". So David writes, apparently sharing this embarrassment:

"A particular discovery is the importance for me of denying the truth of that destructive saying from the late first/early second century community that wrote about how they understood the meaning of Jesus in the Gospel of John: 'No one comes to the Father but by me'. (Another of the sentences that would have been better if never uttered because of the way it has been misinterpreted.)"

The Gospel of John is, in fact, somewhat more nuanced than David would have it, although the caveat of his concluding sentence may reflect his awareness of that nuance. In any case, his particular half quotation is found in chapter 14, verse 6. But the scene has been set much earlier, so that this verse is in fact embraced by two pivotal texts.

In the prologue (1:18), we are told "No one has ever seen God; it is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (NRSV). This presumably serves as the thematic statement for the whole Gospel, since "the drama of salvation", if the phrase may be allowed, begins with the next verse. That drama is provisionally brought to a conclusion in the encounter of Mary with Jesus after his death, calling forth the warning: "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (20:17).

What do we have here? We have what the grammarians call a chiasmus, that is, the reversal of the order in which two grammatical elements occur in a pair of parallel phrases. The order is ab:ba. So, between "No one has ever seen God" and "…to my God and your God", we have respectively "the only Son who is close to the Father's heart" and "…to my Father and your Father".

The point seems to be: in the drama of salvation, God is revealed ("for us and for our salvation"?) to be Father. Because there is an obedient Son "out of Israel", God can be so named. Indeed, it is "the resurrection'" that makes this revelation visible for the first time. That God is "Father", then, is exclusively Christian language. It is not a projection of a contemporary cultural predisposition, then or now, that can be abandoned, much less is it an offensive arrogation that only Christians can claim to '"know" God. Nor can it be expanded (or diminished?) as nineteenth century liberal Protestantism liked to do, in the readily disputable slogan, "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man", against which there is rightful patriarchal protest.

It is patently absurd to claim that Christian faith has a stranglehold on God. What it does have, however, is a definition of what the face of God looks like. The invitation for subsequent generations is to take or leave this sophisticated offer, but not to tinker with it. Presumably baptized Christians and ordained ministers of the Gospel are committed to its taking—but this, regrettably, seems increasingly to be a matter for negotiation.

Bruce Barber

dead but that, *of all people*, God has raised *Jesus of Nazareth*.

The news of such an event, then, creates an extraordinary and very much unexpected situation: Jesus, the one unjustly killed, rightly stands *as a judgment* over those who killed him. This is the cutting edge of Peter's sermon: Jesus died, you killed him, and God has raised him from the dead. This being the scenario he presents, the appropriate response to the sermon is, then, not to "believe in the resurrection" as such, but to *repent*. The resurrection of Jesus is only something worth "believing" if it involves such a repentance. Jesus is saviour to those whose sin was killing him in God's name.

This is the situation for Peter and those to whom he preached on that first Pentecost Sunday. The good news of Easter is not a bland "Jesus is risen" otherwise devoid of inherent meaning; the good news is that the risen Jesus does not return to his persecutors with destroying vengeance, but rather with an unmerited gift of forgiveness. The good news of the presence of the risen, crucified Jesus is not that, with a bit of luck, we might come to have a mystical sense that Jesus is somehow still floating around the place ("alive"), or present in some other vague and non-specific way. There is nothing "spiritual" here, in that sense. The presence of the risen, crucified Jesus is the *revelation* of a very real and specific human failure, coupled with forgiveness from the one who has been failed: "*this* Jesus, whom *you* crucified".

All of this creates something of a problem. The power of Peter's preaching is in the fact that those to whom he preaches are those who are directly culpable for Jesus' death—those to whom God had attested concerning Jesus with deeds of power, wonders, and signs (2:22).[2] The response of those who heard the sermon was one of desperation: "What then shall *we* do?" (2:37). But what of all the rest of the world, who were not there, who do not fall under the label "Israel"? What has the death and resurrection of Jesus to do with us? Where, or what, *is* the presence of the risen, crucified Jesus, here and now? If we try a simplistic transfer of Peter's sermon to our own situation today, we run aground on the problem of sin and salvation as "ideas", described above.

Earlier this year I attended a performance of John's Stainer's *The Crucifixion*, a much-loved 19th-century piece often performed in Holy Week. One of the things which struck me were the words of the congregational hymn "Jesus, the Crucified, pleads for me".

2. Lord, *I* have left thee, *I* have denied, Followed the world in *my* selfish pride; Lord, *I* have joined in the hateful cry, Slay him, away with him, crucify! Lord, *I* have done it, oh! Ask me not how…

resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, those who had been downtrodden unjustly would sit in judgment over their oppressors. The end of the world was to be payback time. Today few of us hold to early Jewish apocalyptic, but we basically agree with the sentiment. We have a small reflection of this sense of justice in our modern "victim impact statements", made at the time of sentencing a convicted felon. We come closer to a feeling that justice has been done when victims have an influence on the treatment of those who have hurt them. If we recoil at the force of the hatred in the words of the Muslim woman above, we understand and agree that "something must be done…".

And yet, this pattern of retaliation to hurt—what we might call the normal human desire to bring to account, to hear and prove the charges, and to make the oppressor pay for the damage done—all of this is missing from Peter's preaching of the crucifixion of Jesus and the response of God. Although Peter pulls no punches in laying before the religious leadership their culpability in the death of Jesus, this charge is not made as a threat of retaliation for what has been done. Rather, an *invitation* is being made: recognize that you have been blind in your treatment of this Jesus; for what you accounted as worthless God has exalted, that every knee might bow and tongue confess *Jesus* as Lord and Messiah over you. Contrast this with the response of the woman to her tormentors, and our similar responses, if perhaps more moderate than hers, to those who in one way or another have hurt us. In this contrast we approach what it means to say that "this Jesus" has been raised up and become a source of salvation.

The point of the New Testament's talk of the resurrection is not simply to assert that a dead person stopped being dead. If this was all, then the resurrection would only be a historical curiosity. It is of the *utmost* importance that the one who stopped being dead was the one who had been *accounted* as worthless, and *for this reason* crucified. "Jesus is risen" is, then, not merely a scientific problem, if it is this at all. It is *just as much* a pressing moral and ethical problem for those who killed him. Theologically, the question which the talk of resurrection originally posed was this: of all the candidates for resurrection in the history of Israel, why would God raise this impious heretic? Why raise the one who dared to say, "You have heard that it was said… but I say to you…"? Why raise the one who happily mixed with tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers and other outcasts and undesirables? Why raise the one who reportedly threatened to tear down the Temple? Peter's preaching presents us with the extraordinary suggestion, not that God can raise the

On the Road

Katharine Massam

A GOOD SCHOLAR needs a pair of stout boots as well as a good library, or so George Trevelyan, the distinguished Cambridge author, once famously said. The "Scholar on the Road" programme at the Uniting Church Theological College takes Trevelyan's advice seriously. In the ten semesters since Howard Wallace pioneered the scheme in 2004, his initiative has become part of the regular planning of the college. Each semester each member of the teaching faculty is "on-the-road" at least twice, to offer the resources of the college outside traditional classroom settings. Schools of ministry, retreats, and congregational workshops on theological themes and specific input on theological issues are fairly typical scholar on the road events; not all of them involve travel to regional Victoria or churches outside the CBD, but many do.

As I have reflected on the "Scholar on the Road" programme for *Cross Purposes*, it has been hard to bypass the significance of Trevelyan's stout boots. Good social historian that he was (of the British reform movement, of Lollardy, of Italian unification, and of much else), I doubt George Trevelyan imagined a faculty would tramp out metaphorically in these boots, bringing what they could of the library with them to enlighten the masses. He imagined the reverse, and recommended stout boots because being out "in the field" was precisely what would enrich scholarship with new perspectives and enliven it with new questions. Scholars would tramp back into the library with a wealth of scholarly resources garnered from the experiences on the road, maybe a little muddied, but set for sharper and deeper discussion. It is the mutuality of the model that offers so much to the UCA College.

Why do the scholars need the road? It is not that classroom teaching is not creative, or that reading is not enriching, or that there is nothing much to do around the college, and it is certainly not because scholars on the road shy away from being expert in their fields. Rather, the road experience is valuable for what it makes clear about the relationship between

knowledge and wisdom, and what the community offers in seeking these. Scholar-on-the-road is the academy seeking wisdom beyond itself from the community of the church, and scholar-on-the-road is a congregation seeking wisdom beyond itself from another part of the church. And after all the Holy Spirit is a communal spirit.

Augustine long ago made the distinction between wisdom and knowledge as two dimensions of Christian experience. In *De Trinitate*, the work that is so significant not only for its contribution to the history of doctrine but also for its central place in the traditions of Christian mysticism, Augustine distinguishes (especially in Book IV and Book XII) between knowledge (*scientia*) that is external and related to bodily senses, and wisdom (*sapientia*) as inward and related to contemplation. Both are vital, Augustine says, because we come to wisdom through knowledge, we come to the eternal through the temporal. The connecting bridge between them, for Augustine and the deepest Christian tradition, is faith in the Incarnate One who holds together wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3) and makes it possible for human beings to return to God.[*]

The point here is that Augustine both distinguishes between and points to the interplay of external knowledge (one might say "facts"?) and interior wisdom (one might say "those truths that answer the question 'How then shall we live?'"). It is neither an arcane nor easy distinction: John Paver's book on *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry* (Ashgate, 2006) demonstrates the power of the division in nineteenth- and twentieth-century theological thinking, and includes a compelling exploration of the struggle to connect them in the life and work of the Theological College in Melbourne; which brings us back to the scholars on the road.

How does the scholar-on-the-road program enable the relationship between wisdom and knowledge? It is important to say that the relationship is clear in classrooms too, though perhaps not so sharply and unavoidably. In week-by-week classroom teaching we can offer students fascinating "factoids", those meteorite-like gems of information, glittering threads of awareness, that are in themselves true and beautiful, valuable and relevant. We can do this not only in standard lectures, but also in small group work, in inductive processes, using reflection on experience, dramatised readings, creative presentations of

[*]For more on the compelling connection of doctrine and mysticism in Augustine and other Christian thinkers, see Andrew Louth's classic book, just reissued, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: from Plato to Denys* (1981; 2nd ed., OUP, 2007).

> taught me to hate. For the last two months there was nothing in me no pain, no bitterness. Only hatred. I taught these children to love. I did. I am a teacher of literature. I was born in Iljas and I almost died there. My student, Zoran, the only son of my neighbor, urinated into my mouth. As the bearded hooligans standing around laughed, he told me: "you are good for nothing else, you stinking Muslim woman…" I do not know whether I first heard the cry or felt the blow. My former colleague, a teacher of physics, was yelling like mad… and kept hitting me. Wherever he could. I have become insensitive to pain. But my soul? It hurts. I taught them to love and all the while they were making preparations to destroy everything that is not of the Orthodox faith. Jihad – war. This is the only way…[1]

Although the intensity of humiliation this woman describes is something which very few of us in western liberal democracies have ever experienced, we might understand how such an experience can lead to the hatred and the hunger for vengeance which has sprung up in her heart.

It does not go too far to make a positive comparison between this woman's humiliation and that experienced by Jesus on Good Friday, with all the obvious qualifications. And yet, by way of contrast, consider the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost to the Jews in Jerusalem. One of the things which strikes me about Peter's remarkable sermon is the way in which he weaves together Jesus, God and the actions the religious leadership have taken.

> **Acts 2** [22]*You that are Israelites*, listen to what I have to say: *Jesus of Nazareth*, a man attested *to you by God* with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that *God* did through *him* among *you*, as *you yourselves* know— [23]*this man*, handed over to *you* according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of *God*, *you* crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. [24] But *God* raised *him* up, having freed *him* from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Peter then concludes, after a couple of proofs from the Psalms:

> [36]Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that *God* has made *him* both *Lord* and *Messiah*, *this Jesus* whom *you* crucified.

Peter's sermon makes a very strong link between the crucified Jesus and those who brought his crucifixion about: "*this Jesus*, whom *you* crucified, *God* has made both *Lord* and *Messiah*". Given the nature of the death of God's Chosen—the extraordinary humiliation of Jesus on the cross—what is God now to do? Within Jewish apocalyptic literature around the time of Jesus there was a strong theme which held that, in the

Having dealt in such a way with the idea of sin, we find that the *idea* of the need for a saviour has been dismissed in the same move. The absence of a radical failing obviates the need for a radical salvation. We may still need *assistance* along our journey, and so traditional figures can become our particular "way" to wherever we would like to be going, but these figures are quite accidental to who and what we are. I may happen to find this or that instructor or exemplar helpful, but any particular one remains secondary to who I am and what I might become, one way or another.

Important in this process of revision is that we are dealing with *ideas* about sin and salvation, and not with the specific realities and experiences these terms seek to point towards. As ideas, formal and somewhat abstract, "sin", "salvation" and "saviour" take on quite an alien aspect. Sin feels like an accusation foreign to my experience of myself, and so also does talk of the need for a saviour. This sense of the alien is further compounded by the challenge presented by the sheer distance between our contemporary situation and when all these "ideas" are supposed to have been clarified and sorted out. Not only do I now learn that I am a sinner in need of salvation before I've actually experienced myself as such, this instruction also comes to me over a great temporal, geographical and cultural distance. How could all that from way back then have anything to do with me? This question is usually qualified with an extra thought, "…other than through what appeals to me personally about it". With this addition we declare that sin and salvation have nothing to do with me as I am in myself—before any thoughts have been had—but only with what might or might not interest me. I know myself better than those who talk of sin and salvation.

Yet, coherent thinking about sin and salvation—at least, *Christian* thinking—cannot begin with sin and salvation as mere concepts or ideas. It must begin with the harshest and most painful *revelation* of each—something which occurs in a single act which both names (and so reveals) a failing in the moment that Jesus himself is named (and so revealed) as the possibility of salvation.

As a way into developing this further, consider the following horrifying passage from a book by Miroslav Volf, citing the testimony of a Muslim woman who suffered in the wars following the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia:

> I am a Muslim… To my second son who is just born, I gave the name "Jihad". So he would not forget the testament of his mother—revenge. The first time I put my baby at my breast I told him, "may this milk choke you if you forget." So be it. The Serbs

research with material drawn from art, architecture, newspapers, poetry, and song as well as traditional texts; and we can increasingly make it all available on-line as well. We can do this until the cows come home, and have great fun doing it brilliantly and well, let us hope.

But the moment that really matters is the one when the fascinating "factoid" moves from being part of a fabric we have woven to having a place in the web of meaning and significance woven by the student. In that unpredictable process of being incorporated, or "grasped", the factoid changes from being an interesting item of "knowledge", and becomes an aspect of "wisdom". It is woven into a larger whole. Sometimes that movement creates a rift as it challenges other accepted parts of the network of meaning, always it prompts a re-weaving, and I think that is what John Paver would identify as the task of theological reflection. It is the difference between having the threads and having a garment, between knowing something and seeing how that connects with being called to live out of the reality of what we know.

Being on the road and outside the traditional classroom is not essential to that interweaving, but it makes the assumption clearer that the potentially disembodied factoids we offer need a home to go to, need to be integrated into patterns of life. Being out of the classroom makes the challenges of integration clearer for scholars on the road too. We can't guarantee "wisdom happens" in every lecture or workshop, but the more deeply we hear the concerns and commitments of the people we are with on the road, and incorporate new understanding into our own fabric of meaning, surely the more likely it must be that we can all see better how to translate between the library and the road, and find how to best hear the stories that the road offers to the library.

The stint I did as scholar on the road in 2005 taught me many surprising things. One was that UCA people in congregations are interested in the sheer facts of church history, that a timeline that put people and events in order through the centuries was no small matter, and that we agree that 1977 is not a date in "early church history". I was reminded that sheer facts are not what makes meaning, of course, but the questions we bring to the facts, and found the affirmation of a search for the sacred in Australia especially compelling. Asking how not just church buildings, but houses, and halls, and patterns of prayer, community stories, and especially memories of individuals both neighbours and strangers, all play their part in Australian understandings of the sacred did not lead to simple answers, but the questions were not idle. People were also keen to put those questions in dialogue with the rich tradition of Christians in other

times and places and appreciated the complexity and skill involved in sifting and sorting the sources, a process that is itself one of weaving and re-weaving. Semester by semester I continue to learn in the classroom too, as students bring new questions to the material, to seek wisdom.

Models of theological education are up for grabs in Australia. Whatever setting and mode we endorse it seems to me we need to allow space for the interplay between the multiplicity of our questions asked from different perspectives, and between what we learn in stout boots and what we learn in the library. The church has a rich tradition in which knowledge can move us deeper into wisdom through community. "Scholar on the Road" is one way that we stay open to that possibility.

KATHARINE MASSAM is Professor of Church History in the Theological College.

"To Be, Or…"

a sermon preached at Hampton UC on the feast of Christ the King

Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-45

Kim Groot

AT THE BEGINNING of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet is scolded by his mother for being so consumed with grief for his father. She asks him to cast off his mourning clothes and to lift his eyes from the ground: "Cast thy nighted colour off … do not forever with thy veiled lids seek for thy noble father in the dust. You know it is common; all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity."

The evil Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and now his mother's husband, joins his voice to that of his new wife and says, "You must know that your father lost a father, that father lost, lost his. This must be so." He goes on to say that Hamlet's "unmanly grief" is "a fault to heaven, a fault against the dead, a fault to nature".

through a glass darkly

What then, does the church proclaim? Jesus according to the apostles, expressed in language capable of coping with the dialogue needed between cultures ancient and new—God's word of salvation in worship, witness and service.

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Notes

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).
[2] Ibid., 1.

Particular Sin—Particular Saviour

Craig Thompson

IN HIS REFLECTION, "Alternatives to Traditional Christian Thought" (*CP* 13), David Merritt relates his discomfort with traditional Christian language about sin and saviours.

"Sin" has become a dirty word in many quarters of the church today. To my mind it is not well understood, not least because the *idea* of sin is usually plucked out of the context of Christian experience and so separated from the *event* of the *revealing* of sin. As an idea, divorced from any particular tangible or historical reality, or even loosely derived from observations of human behavior, "sin" is a wholly negative concept. Given a straight choice between positive ideas about human being and negative ones associated with "sin" ("Original Sin", "Total Depravity")—and no guidance as to why we should choose one and not the other—we understandably reject the pessimism we attribute to the traditionalists and progress to something more optimistic and less "down" on human beings.

op. cit.

thought is driven by precise prose, but for grappling with matters of faith, people will need to be invited into our creative poetic languages for a richer appreciation of life's meanings. This will greatly assist the dialogue between the contemporary cultures and the ancient cultures where the church continues to delve for understanding how God is revealed to humanity, then and now.

The Message of Salvation

"Spin" is the colloquial name we give to interpreted information. We often use the term "spin" to infer that the interpretation is faulty or self-serving. We should acknowledge that nearly all information is interpreted. The way an event is reported will give clues as to whether we should welcome the news or receive it with regret or disdain or some other emotion.

Jesus is the Christian's message of salvation, but that is too simplistic a statement to convey the truth of the matter. Each of us will tell this message with spin. That spin will be influenced by the world that impacts on our own lives, by the people who have been influential on us, by our politics, by our cultural preferences. Sometimes the spin gets a category name such as feminist or liberation theology. All of these interpretations have received the story of Jesus from a common source, the canon of the New Testament. This, in turn, is supported by the canon of the Hebrew scriptures. The story of Jesus could have been told in any number of different ways. Even now we could do an imaginary interpretation from the point of view of any of the prevailing religious or social perspectives of the time. What the church chose and still chooses to do is to receive the story with the New Testament interpretation, with the apostolic spin. Contemporary context will have its effect on the apostolic spin, but that ancient witness that is handed down to us remains an important touchstone for the way the church continues to offer the message of salvation.

Of course the context of contemporary life can rub up against the apostolic spin with some irreconcilable objections. But there is nothing new in this either. The earliest tellers of the story found the same objections. Their message was as culturally inept in their context as it is in ours. Again it is Paul who faces up to this issue when he declared to the church in Corinth: "…but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). It is as if, in frustration, he says that he can not smoothe it all away for everyone or for anyone. It does sound like nonsense but in fact it makes better sense than anything else you will hear.

Like each one of us, Hamlet does know that death is inevitable. He knows that it is part of life. He knows that it is unavoidable, that everyone—himself included—will eventually die. So he tells his mother that he knows that death is, indeed, common. His mother—giving yet another reason to be top of the list in the stupidity stakes—asks him why, if it is common, it seems so particular with him.

Anyone who grieves knows that it makes no difference at all that death is common; knowing that all who live must die is no comfort to us. We *know* that death is the one reality that all people must face; however, it always seems "particular" to us when someone close to us dies. If any are foolish enough or insensitive enough to tell us that our grief is inappropriate because everyone who lives must die, they deserve to be given the short shrift Hamlet gives his mother and uncle. It is true that death is an inevitable part of life, but so is the grief that accompanies it.

Coping with the death of those we love is undeniably difficult; it is *also* difficult for us to grasp the reality of our *own* death—not just to face it, but to think of ourselves as dead. While we might say that we are not afraid of death, and some might even say that they long for death, it is impossible for us to imagine ourselves dead.

In Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" speech, he contemplates suicide because his pain is more than he can bear. Finally, though, he decides not to kill himself because his "dread of something after death" makes him "rather bear those ills (he has) than fly to others that (he) knows not of"; he is afraid that he might discover something even worse on the other side of death. Who will make this discovery though? If we are dead, are we still able to make discoveries of any kind? Who is the "I" that is doing the discovering? Neither we nor Hamlet know what happens when we have shuffled off this mortal coil; death is "the undiscovered country, from which no traveller returns".

Perhaps it's no surprise that Hamlet—who some see as the most self-indulgent figure in the whole of English literature—cannot think of death without himself still as an active, thinking, feeling subject. But Hamlet's not alone in this. None of us can conceive of a world without us in it. We are so much the centre of our own universe that it is absolutely impossible for us to get our heads around our non-existence. How can we think of ourselves not being? How can I think of myself without a sense of myself? Even if I try to imagine death as a kind of deep sleep or a place of emptiness, I am still presuming a form of consciousness. All my thoughts about death take for granted my existence—which, by definition, is not the case if I'm dead.

Indeed, the only way in which it might be possible—and bearable—to contemplate my own death is from within the context of the Christian faith. That is because of the death of Jesus.

When God the Son became a creature who dies—as all creatures must—he brought the experience of human death, of non-existence, into God. The end of life, that moment when the last breath is breathed and the person who was, is no more—that event belongs to the relationship between the Father and the Son; indeed, paradoxically, it is the moment when human life ceases to be that is the very life that is God; it is the death of God the Son which is at the heart of the very nature of God.

Because the death of Jesus belongs to the very being of God, when it comes to *my* death, it *is* possible to think of it because God the Son has died before me and for me. Because God the Son died, therefore I can die. Because Jesus died, therefore I can, in fact, enter that country from which no traveller returns.

I can face the death of those I love and my own death because, when I am lost to this world, I am not lost to God. I can face my own non-existence because I am remembered by God: I am put back together by God. I can face death because I am part of the conversation that takes place between the Son and the Father in the Spirit, and to be remembered there is really to live. It means being held in the mind of God, being part of the will of God, belonging to the purpose of God in eternity.

The church cannot talk about death without also talking about resurrection. However, resurrection is not a way of side-stepping death. It's not a way in which my life somehow continues, a way I somehow keep on living after death. Resurrection is not about immortality. It does not mean that my life just starts up again after a little break.

Rather, resurrection is the initiative of the God who creates, who sustains and fulfils what he has made; God is the one within whose life, within whose memory, I am remembered and therefore live. Death is not the end for God. Because death does not have the last word in relation to Jesus, death does not have the last word in relation to us. Resurrection means that the life I have lived is eternally presented and interpreted within the community of God; the life I have lived is part of the conversation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit eternally. In God, the end of existence is no barrier to participation in loving communion; for God, death is no barrier to life.

It is very tempting for us to think of our existence continuing past death in some way that has continuity with life as we know it now; Shakespeare has Hamlet's father appear to him as a ghost come to tell him that something

labyrinth of contradictory and multi-layered truths.

In a "prose-flattened world",[2] the church will attempt to find its prose for its proclamation. We will attempt to extract meaning from the scriptures so the ancient words can become palatable—accessible on our terms. But we need also to stir up our poetic languages for they are the language preferred in the bible. The ancient texts will surely reveal more of themselves as we enter into their cultures. Without a dialogue between the ancient and contemporary cultures we run the risk of falling into a fundamentalism in which we either read the poetic language of the scriptures as if they are scientific language or we discount what cannot be adequately explained in the light of modern knowledge and refuse to let the inexplicable inform our faith.

It needs to be said that the problem of the language of faith transmitting successfully across different cultures is by no means new. Paul discovered this as he moved from his Jewish world into the Greek world. Luke has Paul's and Peter's sermons appeal to their synagogue congregations in terms of the Hebrew scriptures. The language that had provided framework for articulating the revealing of God in the lives of God's people was used again to talk about God's continued revealing in the events that surrounded Jesus of Nazareth—his life and deeds, his teaching and the manner of his death, and then the life of this same crucified Jesus among his followers after his death. In Athens, among the Greek philosophers, Luke suggests that Paul could not appeal to the Hebrew scriptures. Instead, in front of the Areopagus, he made connection through one of their own poets, Aratus.

In his writings Paul reveals his awareness that he is living and teaching in a cross cultural world. He was a Jew teaching about Jesus who was a Jew, so his primary reference points are Jewish, most notably that of the law. But the gospel was not for Jews alone so he made connections for those not bound by the law of Moses. For example he wrote:

> **Rom. 2** [14]When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. [15]They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them [16]on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

The languages of worship, witness and service that the church used to set forth the message of salvation must reckon with the contemporary languages that people can connect with. In our own time it will need to acknowledge that so much of our

became a huge undertaking. They were assisted by the development of printing, but it wasn't just a matter of translating texts from an ancient language into a modern one—Latin into German or French or English. In worship most of the liturgy had been sung, but the church's music was not the music of the tavern or the market or the fields. Music in the church was professionalized. If the word of salvation is for all people and if any of the texts were to be sung, the music must be the people's music. That is why the hymn music tradition of the church in the west is based on European folk music. It is in this tradition that John Bell and the Iona Community have set their songs and psalm paraphrases to the folk music of the Celts, Africa, Asia and South America.

Dealing with preferences in musical language will always confront the church. Within the same community people gravitate towards particular cultural tastes. This is not like having a football team you like to barrack for. This is like having a preferred football code. Understanding the language of another code is like trying so sing in a unfamiliar or unlikable musical style—Hillsong over against plainsong, chorus over against Taizé.

Grappling with the musical language dilemma is simple compared to the verbal language dilemma. The preferred verbal language of contemporary western culture is scientific prose. It is an excellent means of communication for coping with most of life's demands. It is precise to an extent that what the words say is intended to mean exactly the same to the hearer as to the speaker. Where we run into trouble is when we expect scientific prose to cope with all meaning that humans can perceive. An anecdote is told about Franz Liszt, the nineteenth century Hungarian composer. When he played a new piano composition to his friends, one friend asked, "What does it mean?" Liszt replied, "It means this". And he played the piece through again. We live with this same expectation of being able to nail the meaning of everything down with words. What gets nailed down has nowhere to move—it cannot dance or fly, it cannot stray into the meaning of some other meaning or find a home in the unknowing.

Walter Brueggemann calls on the church to discover its poetic language for exploring the mysteries of its proclamation.[1] This is the language of images and sounds and movements and stories. It conjures a world of meaning that is no less true than the hard facts that prose describes. Indeed it allows for the possibility that truth is not an absolute and the poetic language that can articulate faith can find for us a pathway through the

is rotten in the state of Denmark. We see all sorts of nonsense from Hollywood that suggests the dead can come back to take care of unfinished business. Hamlet is right to speak of death as that country from which no traveller returns, for the only continuity between life and death is in God, not in ourselves and our own agenda, but in God and in his agenda.

The agenda of God the Father is to rescue us from the power of darkness and transfer us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. This is achieved through the *mutual* decision of the Son and the Father in the Spirit. The death of Jesus on the cross is not divine child abuse, as Spong argues; it is the mutual decision of the community of God—Father, Son and Spirit—and it is for our sake.

The whole of my experience is preserved in the mind of God. So while we might be gone from one another—and properly grieve our loss—we are never gone from God, in life or death. To be remembered in the mind of God is truly to live. We are rescued from the alienation and sadness and evil that belongs to this world and transferred into a communion of mutual love.

That is what is achieved by the king who rules from the cross, the king who died a death of absolute alienation at the hands of cruel human beings. This is the king who harrowed hell, who preached to the dead, the king for whom none are beyond redemption and forgiveness.

One of the thieves who was crucified alongside Jesus asked that Jesus remember him when he came into his kingdom. We give thanks to God that each one of us is remembered in God's kingdom; indeed, all who have ever lived and died are remembered, rescued from the power of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of the beloved Son.

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Double Take

by Hilary Howes

What the Church Proclaims

Salvation, Its Language and Message

Peter Blackwood

I HAVE NOT ASKED any of those who collaborated in writing the *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church if they meant the document to guide the church beyond the task of bringing three churches into union in 1977. It certainly reads like a memorandum of understanding to accomplish one purpose at a particular time, but over 30 years later the *Basis* still holds a significant place in the life of our church for many of us. For this reason I find myself returning to its wisdom more and more. In a changing world and a changing church it has become, for me, a place for checking our bearings.

This sentence sits in the middle of the first paragraph of the *Basis*:

> …they [the three churches entering union] look for a continuing renewal in which God will use their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people.

A significant challenge for the church is to check if the word of salvation for our time and place is the same word for former times and places. Is the message the same? Is the language the same? This raises two main issues—how will the word be set forth, and what will that word say? What is the language of the church's proclamation? What is the message of salvation?

The Language of Salvation

The *Basis* suggests that we are to engage in a number of languages—"worship, witness and service", so that is a help, or is it? Finding our language for setting forth deep mysteries like "the word of salvation for all people" has always been problematic. The gospel writers are clear that some understood what Jesus was talking about and many didn't, some believed and many laughed. If the "word" is for people, then finding the people's language is essential.

The Reformers of the church took this massive task very seriously. Setting forth the word of salvation in people's own language

On Areopagus Hill