

Language and Faith

Martin Spence discusses the primal importance of symbols.

In March the SOF London Conference, *In the Beginning was the Word*, explored connections between religion, poetry and story. These connections are undeniable and unsurprising, for poetry and story surely represent human language at its richest, best able to express the complexities of faith. But what about language as such? Is there a connection between the linguistic act, the meaningful utterance, and faith? I think that there is, and that the best approach to this connection is to start not with language, nor with faith, but with signs – and more specifically, with that very special sort of sign, the *symbol*.

A sign is a gesture indicating a referent: for instance, your pointing finger (sign) indicates a tree (referent), inviting me to look at the tree, or name it, or go to it, depending on context. A symbol however is a less straightforward, more complex sign. It may have only an oblique connection with its referent, a connection that needs teasing out; or a clear connection alongside other, indirect hints of the referent's character or properties; or multiple subtle connections to several associated referents. So for instance, in pictures and statues of the Madonna and Child, the infant Christ is often shown holding an apple. At one level, it's just a representation of a piece of fruit. But it also symbolises the apple of Genesis, the forbidden fruit, which in turn conjures up Eve's temptation, Adam's sin, original sin, humanity's suffering, Christ as the Second Adam come to redeem that sin, therefore the price of that redemption, the agony of the Passion to come which already overshadows the future of this child being cuddled by his mother ... All this, in a simple representation of a piece of fruit.

It is impossible for us to interpret symbols without using language. Nevertheless, the archaeological evidence suggests that symbols came first. We all know the Palaeolithic cave paintings in France and Spain which are undoubtedly symbolic, but the very earliest symbolic artefacts are much older, tens of thousands of years older. They come from Africa where the human species emerged. They are objects of red ochre, and patterned stones, and beaded shells. They indicate symbolic intent, but their makers had no language like ours. The implication therefore is that symbolism predates language and was a precondition for it: not the only precondition, but a key one.

Why does this matter? It matters because we often discuss language as if its basic task were just to label and describe things, and as if richer and subtler uses – metaphor, poetry – were optional extras, icing on the cake. But if symbols, with all their complexity, predate language and help make it possible, then a different perspective emerges. In this perspective, language was rich and complex from the start, existing not to assign labels, but to address a shifting world of events and unfolding states of affairs; a world in which we encounter other human creatures with motives and understandings of their own which we must try to grasp and respond to; and a world in which we must understand ourselves as objects for others, and try to perceive ourselves as others perceive us. This is a world in which linguistic subtlety is not an added extra but fundamental and essential.

Language is capable of this subtlety and complexity because of the way it combines licence and rule. We are capable in principle of making a vast range of vocal sounds by manipulating our larynxes, tongues, cheeks, teeth and breath. But in practice, when speaking, we use only those sounds favoured by our particular language-community, in accordance with its customs regarding the referents to which these sounds symbolically point, and its rules regarding grammar and syntax. These customs and rules may sound restrictive, but in fact they are fantastically liberating. They make it possible for me to say, in the same linguistic register and with the same grammatical correctness, both 'I am a man' (which is prosaically true) and 'I am a hedgehog' (which may be metaphorically true, but is certainly not prosaically true).

Language is therefore a symbolic system which allows us to refer equally to things which exist in the world, and to things which do not exist but which might, and to things which do not exist but which we claim do exist, and to things which could never exist, and to things which exist fictionally in some other fictional world ... and so on. George Steiner makes the point with rather brutal clarity:

'The human capacity to utter falsehood, to lie, to negate what is the case, stands at the heart of speech and of the reciprocities between word and world ... We are a mammal who can bear false witness'.

Language is, then, intrinsically uncertain and untrustworthy. Our utterances are not clear and precise: they demand interpretation by those who hear them. And interpretation is inseparable from meaning.

We tend to use the word 'meaning' rather promiscuously, to refer to any association between a sign and a referent. But if we go back to the origins of the word, we will find that it is more precise than this. Our word 'meaning' is Germanic rather than Latin, and like many words of Germanic (including Anglo-Saxon) origin, its root-sense lies not in abstract concepts or principles, but in concrete, personal action and motivation. Meaning is about *intention* on the part of the speaker or doer, and *interpretation* on the part of the hearer or observer.

Meaning and interpretation are therefore intertwined. It is tempting to think of meaning as a final result, an end-point of interpretation: so, in the case of Christ's apple, we might want to say that we arrived at a set of meanings through an act of interpretation. But this would be wrong, because in order to perform that act of interpretation we need already to know something about Christian theology and symbolism. This is why the philosopher Charles Taylor suggests that meaning is not so much the result you get after you establish a connection between an utterance and a thing; rather, meaning is 'the route you take' to get from the utterance to the thing.

To sum up my argument so far: language is uniquely human; it is a symbolic system; it is a particularly fertile symbolic system by virtue of its combination of licence and rule; but this fertility makes its utterances intrinsically uncertain or untrustworthy; so language necessarily requires interpretation, and necessarily generates meaning. Language is the precondition for meaning.

Endless possibilities are opened up by this subtle, untrustworthy, linguistic faculty of ours: the crabwise insights of poetry; the formal satisfactions of story; the dangerous persuasions of rhetoric; and the option of faith. The theologian Paul Tillich described faith as: 'the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern which combines subjective and objective meaning'. And he also said: 'Only in a community of language can man (sic) actualise his (sic) faith'.

Putting these together, Tillich was saying, firstly, that *meaning* is at the centre of faith: specifically, a 'combination of subjective and objective meaning' which I take to refer to a surrender of oneself to, or a discovery of oneself through, the 'ultimate concern'. And secondly, Tillich was very clear that faith is not



Hans Memling *Madonna and Child with Apple*. 1487. Central Panel, Portinari Triptich, Staatliche Museen, Berlin,

some personal, narcissistic indulgence. None of us can simply conjure up our own private faith out of our own imagination. On the contrary, faith is a presence in the world, conditioned by culture and history, and requires a commitment to a 'community of language' with an already-existing body of symbol, tradition and meaning.

Tillich went on to argue that there is one particular manifestation of 'ultimate concern' which has a unique value and integrity: 'ultimate concern' in the form of 'New Being' heralded or represented by Christ Crucified. I'm not going to follow him there, I'm not going to address the many varieties of form and content in faith. I'm going to stop at its threshold, and end simply by reiterating my central point: that our uniquely human faculty of language is the precondition for meaning in the world, and therefore the precondition for faith.

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