

The Body of Christ

Stephen Mitchell

On Wednesday 30th May 1431, in the Old Market in Rouen, near the Church of Saint Saviour, a teenage girl was burnt to death. Over the four months, leading up to her execution, she'd been subjected to a long examination, during which she made this response:

About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they are just one thing, and we shouldn't complicate the matter.

Joan of Arc's words are quoted in the Roman Catholic *Catechism* along with another saying by St Augustine:

Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you understand and grasp God's grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ.

As Christians say in their communion services: 'We are the body of Christ'.

I'm not sure many of us would agree with Joan that this is something simply known and for many, the language is baffling. And if that isn't complicated enough, in their communion services, Christians receive a piece of bread and a sip of wine to the words 'the body of Christ'.

To add to the confusion, St Paul coined the phrase 'in Christ' to express the Christian hope and belief. Writing to the churches, he addresses their members, the saints, as those 'in Christ'. 'When we are baptised,' he writes, 'we are baptised into Christ.' 'In Christ all shall be made alive.' Indeed, 'to live is Christ,' says St Paul, because 'Christ lives in me'. 'In Christ there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female but all are one in Christ. Christ is all and in all, for we are the body of Christ.'

Given this sort of language, it's not surprising that people should want to say, 'Let's keep it simple and get back the clear message of Jesus

which has been fatally confused by the likes of St Paul and the leaders of the church.'

In the many tributes to the author Hilary Mantel, who died in September of this year, the BBC repeated an episode of *Word of Mouth*, in which Michael Rosen asked her if Catholicism had been an early influence and whether, as a youngster, she'd read the Bible:

Oh Catholics didn't read the bible in my day. My grandmother thought it was a Protestant book, and that wasn't far off the way it was regarded. You didn't read the Bible; the priest told you what was in the Bible. What you had was the Catechism and you had prayers. And when I was a child, the Mass was in Latin. So you had your prayer book, with a parallel translation which was very florid, sonorous and rotund, not normal language at all – elevated language. And when I think of the prayers we used to say:

'Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of mercy,
our life, our sweetness and our hope.
To thee do we cry,
poor banished children of Eve.
To thee do we send up our
sighs, mourning and weeping
in this valley of tears.'

Well it's not your everyday chit-chat and it's not a big jump from there to the language of *Wolf Hall*.

In the church, there has been a reaction against the elevated, religious language that Hilary Mantel describes, and a return to everyday chit-chat. There's also been a desire to read the Bible for ourselves, without the help of a priest. So that whereas for St Paul and the church, the Christian journey begins with becoming a member of the body of Christ, now, for many, it begins with Jesus and his sayings as recorded in the Gospels, with the real, historical man who lived two thousand years ago.



Jesus on the beach by a charcoal fire (John 21: 1-14). [.cccchelmsford.org](http://cccchelmsford.org)

Over the past centuries, encouraged by Protestant reformers, scholars have attempted to discover the sources and events behind the biblical texts. At the same time, the books of the Bible have been examined as complete works of literature. These two approaches don't always sit very comfortably together. The more a text is treated as a whole, and details in the text given literary explanations, the harder it is to establish its historical accuracy.

To take one tiny example, in the last chapter of John's Gospel, not long after the resurrection, seven of Jesus' disciples spend a fruitless night fishing. In the morning, a stranger on the shore tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat and they catch one hundred and fifty three fish. On hauling this enormous catch ashore, they see a charcoal fire with fish on it. The reader is immediately taken back to another charcoal fire, in front of which Peter warmed himself before his denial of Jesus.

John is the only New Testament writer to mention charcoal fires. Has he placed them there for literary effect, or is this a historical detail? We imagine that distinctive aroma of burning coals as Jesus, beside Lake Galilee, asks Peter three times whether he loves him, summoning up the memory of his anguish as the cock crowed thrice. And what of the 153 fish of which there have been many allegorical explanations? Is that historically accurate? These are trivial examples.

Dinah, in the September issue of *Sofia*, highlighted a more significant example in the Beatitudes. Matthew writes 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' while Luke has 'Blessed are the poor'. Have we to decide which (if any) came from the mouth of Jesus? If we remove any historically doubtful phrases from the texts, we are left with a very impoverished narrative. From a literary point of view, extracting a supposed historical backbone from the Bible leaves the texts gutted.

No doubt, in a similar way, people have pored over Hilary Mantel's trilogy to discover whether it is historically accurate. Unlike the Gospels, there are many outside sources that can be consulted. The later television adaptation of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* has also been scrutinised to see if it is faithful to her books and whether Mark Rylance's performance does justice to both her portrayal of Cromwell and the historical character. It's all very interesting and instructive. But in the end, whatever our success in separating fact from the fiction, we are enriched by her books and the subsequent film, discovering not only new insights into Tudor England, but also truths about the use of power in our own day.

If one could be absolutely certain what Jesus actually said and did, would we want to abandon the rest of the Gospels? I happen to agree with the scholar Michael Goulder that Matthew, rather than Jesus, composed the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer, which were then later adopted by Luke. It doesn't stop me using them in my prayers.

I happen to think that Luke composed the songs (like the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*) that appear in the first few chapters of his Gospel, rather than the characters to whom they are attributed. I still happily sing them at Evensong. Most people believe the stories of Jesus' birth were written by Luke and Matthew. I also believe Luke, and not Jesus, wrote the parable of the Good Samaritan, but I remain convinced it can illuminate my life and my faith.

It isn't only a question of historical fact; it's a question of meaning. If I'm wrong, and Jesus did in fact tell the tale of the Good Samaritan, I don't feel bound to use it in the context in which it appears in his Gospel. Even if I could be certain of Jesus' words and what he meant by his words, I am not compelled to use the texts in the same way, any more than a director is compelled to follow a given interpretation of a Shakespeare play.

Religions are complex and evolving cultural creations in which history, myth, liturgical performance, moral teaching and exhortation, come together to enrich, and give meaning, to a community of faith. As believers are plunged into

the waters of baptism at the start of their journey of faith, so they become immersed in that community, its worship and scriptures, its saints and its pursuit of justice and peace. For them, to believe in God *is* to practise their faith. To believe is to be a member of the body of Christ.

Like all institutions, faiths must evolve and adapt to the present but there are, I believe, two dangers for the Christian community (and perhaps other faith communities) in adopting a chit-chat language in its services and focussing its attention on a historical Jesus.

In her interview, Hilary Mantel described the importance of finding the right language and narrative style for her novels, not only to take us back to life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but also to help us look on our own times with a new perspective. Her style isn't complex; for example, she only uses the present tense. But it isn't simple and it's far from ordinary chit chat.

We know that there are sacred poems (by John Donne, for example) which use very little religious vocabulary and Don Cupitt has shown how the word *life* has in many ways replaced the word God in our everyday speech. Language which portrays our deepest desires doesn't have to be florid or full of religious jargon but it needs to be poetic and packed with interpretive possibilities. We should also remind ourselves that there have been many successful projects introducing Shakespeare and Elizabethan language to youngsters who haven't found it a barrier to expressing insights into their world.

During the lockdown of the recent pandemic, churches offering services from the Book of Common Prayer were surprised at the number of people 'tuning in' to traditional services. One church, which usually sees as few as five people attending a 1662 service, reported online attendance in the hundreds. Many churches turned to the language of the BCP to mark the Queen's death.

The church, in its prescribed liturgies, hasn't always been successful in its attempts to bring services to contemporary congregations. Many begin with the greeting 'The Lord be with you' and its response 'And also with you'. It's certainly

better than 'Nice to see you; to see you nice', which I confess to once using in a Family Service. But the word 'Lord' leaves many feeling uncomfortable and wondering if the revision is any better than the original 'The Lord be with you; and with thy spirit.' Why not use 'God be with you' or one of the many other imaginative ways of opening a service in use today. The issue of finding a contemporary language for faith is important because reducing its message to the sayings of a long-dead prophet risks losing some of the important things we still want to say.

It's quite likely that Jesus, in an extraordinary act of daring creativity, did take the bread of the Passover and ask his followers to interpret the meal in the light of his life and death. But Paul, as we saw, took the image of the body of Christ further. And with him, we want to speak of a God in which we live and move and have our being. We still want to see in our neighbours the glory and the demands we think of as God's. We want our communities to be as God in the world. We want to see in the central act of our worship the challenge and responsibility of the death of God. We want to be able to say with St. Teresa of Avila: 'Christ has no body but ours, no hands, no feet on earth but ours.'

We do this because faith must be rooted in the reality of the present. It will soon be Christmas

(yes, not Jesusmas!) and those who see themselves as Christians and members of the body of Christ will again be reminded of what it is to be Christ in the world. Christ, in the shorthand of the carol, 'came down to Earth from heaven'. Paul describes Christ's journey in his letter to the Philippians:

The divine nature was his from the first;
yet he did not snatch at equality with God,
but bearing human likeness
accepted even death on a cross.

There are so many ways in which we act as God having near God-like powers, whether through our technology, our treatment of the environment, or our exercise of power. We are truly remarkable beings. But our journey is a constant letting go, being brought down to Earth, accepting death and in that journey in Christ, in the company of the body of Christ, we find life, we find ourselves in the presence of that which we call God.

Stephen Mitchell, a former chair of the SOF Steering Committee, is a retired vicar and occasional blogger, who enjoys making music. His *Agenda for Faith* is downloadable as a free pdf at: sofn.org.uk/pages/agendaforfaith.html. His *God in the Bath* was published by John Hunt Publishing in 2006.



A DVD of *The Sea of Faith* six-part documentary series presented by Don Cupitt on BBC television in 1984 is still available from Chris Avis.
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