All God-Talk is Metaphor

Robin Scott 18-10-2017

“No-one has ever seen God”. Nor can anyone encompass God with a definition. More importantly no-one can ever experience God from God’s perspective, but only from a human perspective – from which we tentatively attribute certain well-honoured graces and admirable states of being to God.

Thus we use human language to metaphorically describe God – or aspects of God. We also use human minds to asses and re-assess what can rightly be named as God. Even when we name God as “Love” we are drawing on a human emotional experience which helps us reach out beyond the human.

A “meta-phor” literally carries across meaning from a well-known category to a less well-known one in order to assist in giving meaning or embellishment to the latter. Marcus Borg talks of metaphor as carrying a “surfeit or meaning”. Thus it is inappropriate to think (dismissively) of “mere metaphor” because metaphor aims at enhancing understanding.

Metaphors, however, only work in a context where they produce immediate cognitive insight. If I describe God as a shepherd and then have to go on and preach a sermon on what the concept of shepherd would have meant to a first century Jew, then what would be the point in using the metaphor? It has failed to bring immediate cognitive insight to my hearer. S/he has not experienced an “aha” moment though it

There are many metaphors for God and Jesus in the Bible; some obvious ones being, creator, king, shepherd, vinedresser, father, son, spirit, Lamb, sacrifice, all 7 of the I am sayings, and so on. God or Jesus is not substantively any of these, but any one of them may give insight into how God may be envisaged and approached. For example God is not the father of Jesus nor my father; but the metaphor of father may be useful in processing our ideas of the relationship between God and Jesus or God and me. It can be likened to father.

You can apply this principle also to the death of Jesus. Why did Jesus die? The factual answer to that is that he became a political irritant to both the Jews and the Romans of his time and he was executed as a political subversive. Above his cross Pilate put the words “The King of the Jews”. That is why Jesus was crucified. Yet few Christians give much credence to this nor work out any significant theology from it.

Christians – certainly of the evangelical camp – lurch immediately towards metaphor to explain Jesus’ death. Jesus is seen under the metaphor of Jewish sacrifice. He is God’s Lamb. He is our Passover. He is an atoning sacrifice. He is also Christ. None of these terms bears any cognitive significance for today’s hearer: the vocabulary is totally out-of-culture. People will respond, well that’s what the Bible says – and it is. But why? Because the events of Jesus life and the first explanations of his death are totally rooted in the 2nd Temple Judaism of the first century which was the bread and butter of their society. What other metaphor would writers like Paul – a Jewish Pharisee - be likely to use?

How did the first apostles rationalise the ignominious death of Jesus against their claim that he was God’s true Messiah? Essentially they conflated the Messianic expectation with the idea of Passover and they emphasised those metaphors in the Old Testament that sustained such a re-write. For most contemporary Christians that focuses on Isaiah 53 – the suffering servant.

The question is, how much of either of those metaphors (Messiah and Passover) have any relevance to 21st century citizens? Remember too that they live not in an pastoral society with shepherds and vineyards and not in an autocratic Kingdom, but in a democracy of which they are justly proud.

So in summary, the question is, how do we find relevant metaphors for God, God’s “kingdom” and God’s world vision for today’s ears?

It may be that you find the recognition of the whole Biblical story as a series of reflective metaphors somewhat releasing in that it means you *can* tell the story of God that way (and clearly that’s how the ancients *did*  tell it) but you equally you can choose to use contemporary metaphors which might have a more immediate cognitive impact and work as metaphors are intended to do – as revelatory and insightful pictures of what we might refer to as God, justice, and equity for the world.

The problem is that instead of being able to turn to a would-be eternally fixed revelation of God in the Bible, we then have to continually debate and revise our metaphors, sifting and agreeing which are more or less helpful for today and also agreeing to disagree where that is necessary.

But in the end, it’s all about metaphors.