

COMMUNICATING THE WORD

Presidential Address by the Revd Marion Dodd

May 2008

Part I

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

Those of us who heard Duncan Forrester at the annual meeting of the Dunkeld Fellowship recently will smile every time we hear John 1:1 from now on, for he told of a Bible study in India at which a Buddhist monk, reflecting on tranquillity, commented on the fact that, for us Christians, even in the beginning there was no silence, no tranquillity. For in the beginning was the Word.

And God SAID, "Let there be light," and there WAS Light.

The Word was spoken, and it was done.

Those of you who have been commissioners at the General Assembly this week will recall hearing that communication was high on the Church's agenda this year – a major part of the Council of Assembly's report, the subject of the Highland service, communicating the Gospel in Gaelic, and now the theme of my Presidential address! I chose to speak on 'Communicating the Word' because for most of the eighteen years of my relatively short ministry (compared with other esteemed divines in this company today!), I have been totally fascinated by the *difficulty* that presents itself in communicating what we have to say.

Here is God, who created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them out of his sheer love, and who made human beings, in Augustine's words, for himself, "with a heart that is restless until it finds its rest in God."¹ You would think it would be easy to communicate from the one to the other, and from one created being to another, especially when the message is one of love. The Bible, and the history of the Church, are testimonies to the reality that it is not. In the time I have available, I can only scratch the surface of this not-insignificant subject. However, I will attempt it from a basic Trinitarian angle, in the hope that this method will point up both the problems and the answer.

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

In the beginning – there was no problem, for God knew what he had said and it was done. The trouble began when he created human beings, made in his image because he loved them and wanted them to respond by doing his will, and to coexist happily with him for ever.

It didn't take long for him to discover the problem. "You shall eat of any tree in the garden, but you just must not eat of the tree in the middle of the garden." A spot of manipulation, wilful misunderstanding, and we have a murder on our hands. Direct speech proved not to be foolproof, as we often discover in some of the procedural matters at the General Assembly! Clearly there were exceptions to the rule – people who heard and responded to what God was saying – but this was the exception rather than the norm. God would have to find other ways to communicate his promises and his will to his people. And, in the early days, imaginative methods – a talking bush, engraved tablets of stone, a wrestling competitor – were effective, if surprising, vehicles of this communication.

The most durable was the Law, God's Word written in tablets of stone, and later verified in the spoken Word as it thundered down the centuries from the prophets, both captured for posterity in the canon of scripture. The Word of God was at the very centre of worship from the beginning, housed in the Ark of the Covenant, and taking pride of place in our holy places too, as it is carried in and laid on our lecterns – the supreme standard in our Reformed tradition.

But the Word down through time has been the victim of the very people it was intended to enlighten. Standing as supreme standard, it has been subject to interpretation, which for many of us makes our journey with it so fascinating. The homet's nest, however, keeps being disturbed by people who are adamant that God has spoken in one way, and one way alone. Perhaps you, like me, have met the traditionalist who longs to get back to saying the Lord's Prayer "the way Jesus did"! The fact is undeniable. God took a colossal risk in using the human language to communicate his promises and his commands. A few Massoretic dots and dashes are enough to prove the point.

The very first commandment hinted at the size of the problem that lay ahead. “*Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*” The known world worshipped a pantheon of gods, and in a variety of ways, but, as Hans von Balthazar has expressed it (if I am allowed in this august company to move beyond the bounds of Presbyterian thinking), ‘the revelation of the one true God waited, (so that it might be understood in faith in a manner worthy of man), waited for a certain syncretist monotheism to be established’² around the area (Babylon and Egypt) – hence God’s judgment on those who persisted in Baal worship. Imposing one deity was problem enough for the early people of God. Imposing one language on an ever-widening body of worshipping people was another, as happened first with the seventy-two translators of the Old Testament, and later with Jerome’s Vulgate. The Septuagint had been an attempt to regularise misunderstandings by bringing the Word within the confines of one language. The Reformation saw an attempt to put right the Latin mistakes by returning to the original scriptural languages while the invention of the printing press encouraged John Wyclif, Martin Luther and others to begin to make the Word available to the people in their own language. After all, St Paul had urged the Corinthians, “Unless you speak intelligible words, how will the message be understood?” (I Cor. 14:9). A flood of Bibles followed and continues to this day.

A question that exercises some minds is whether this long-standing attempt to bring God’s Word more and more within reach of the common folk hasn’t served to dumb down the very mystery that is at its heart. And there is no doubt that many devout elderly folk would argue that their love for the old language is by reason of it being different from our daily language. It is ‘other’.

But of course, those who argue, as I would tend to do, for the use of modern language in worship, should also recognise, as I also do, that for long enough, the worshipping people simply did not understand what was going on, for the language of the church was not the language of the people. As long as they knew someone understood, it had authority. And of course there has always been so much more to do in church than simply listen to the priest or minister. There are stories on the walls, in the windows, music to listen to and sing, clerical dress to marvel at, and a whole atmosphere of otherness to be experienced. Words are only part of the experience.

Stewart Todd is not with us today, but would, I am sure, allow the story to be told of his father, whose musical taste encompassed folk music, and not much more. Mr. Todd was persuaded once by Stewart and his sister to go and hear Kathleen Ferrier singing at the Festival Hall in London. He went, somewhat against his will, not expecting to enjoy it. Ferrier sang a whole programme of German Lieder, Stewart's father was transfixed, and asked to go back stage afterwards and meet Kathleen Ferrier. He had not understood a word.

However, it was human words that God chose as the first vehicle to communicate his message. The human voice was the driver. I believe you are all too young to have benefited from the wonderful speech training that my father had at New College with Alastair Sim in the 1920s. They were very different requirements in those days, with no microphones and many more bodies to dampen the acoustics. But the same need was there for vitality in the voice. The Word has too often suffered from poor delivery, a fact that many preachers do not appreciate. Moses recognised the problem, insisting that his speech was not good enough. He was encouraged to ask his brother to speak for him. However, Moses, we have to agree, did not do a bad job himself. It's a question of making impact in whatever way is right for you. Scots have an extraordinary unwillingness to open the mouth – this is particularly noticeable with singing! – but if the speaker can be persuaded to vary inflection, change tempo, pause sometimes, and stop singing the same monotonous tune all the way through a sentence, the listener will be much more likely to take in what is being said. (We all know what happened to “Send reinforcements, we’re going to attack!”). Eye contact is also important. Many people develop quirky habits, for example fixing their gaze between two distinct points – one on their notes, the other often high in the rafters.

Many, in fact most of you, I would guess, wear a critical ear for the inaccuracies and inconsistencies of theological and Biblical content. I would join you, but first I would be transfixed by the hands that mix the dough, the face that never moves, the eyes that never leave the page. We notice different things. A reference to Kathleen Ferrier again – my father this time. He and I were listening to an old 78rpm record of ‘Blow the wind southerly’, and as I was analysing each note, and gently willing one or two of them to sharpen just a little, my father's face was glowing. He was in a trance, transported to some Elysian land, flowing with milk and honey!

Just as happens with Chinese whispers, part of the problem of hearing or seeing different things is that we all receive the message against a very different background. What leaves my mouth is very different by the time it reaches each of your ears and much of it may not even have been heard! Dame Janet Baker, writing the story of her final year in opera, *Full Circle*, explains why she was never very keen on making recordings. 'A performance', said the diva, 'is not complete until it has been received.'³ And any performance will be received in myriad ways. Often in my own experience of music-making, I would compare notes with my brother and sister-in-law – both first violinists – on a performance of, say, Beethoven's Choral Symphony in which we had all been participating, and you would think we had been talking about a different work, let alone a different performance. And yet, in this business of communicating, the hope is always that, having said what we have said, it has been heard and understood exactly as we would want it to be understood. The reality could not be further from the hope.

Thus it is with sermons, lectures, and dare one say, Presidential addresses! Leonard Small, of blessed memory to Edinburgh folk, spoke once of a sermon which he preached, and how a visitor came out of the church, congratulated him on the sermon, and said he had particularly liked the story about the carpet slippers. Leonard thanked the man, and when the congregation had gone, went to his Session Clerk and asked if he had heard him tell a story in the sermon about carpet slippers. The Session Clerk looked suitably embarrassed. No, he didn't think he had heard such a story. "That's because I didn't tell one," said Leonard. "But that man heard a story about carpet slippers!"

It's something in this vein that Augustine picked up when he described church music as ambiguous – being both very ordered, and emotive at the same time. Raymond Warren, composer and writer, describing this 'Augustinian ambiguity', invites his readers to 'imagine a composer writing a tone poem on the Christian experience of death and resurrection, but suppose that at its first performance the title of the work is withheld from the audience. What,' he asks, 'might they make of it?' ... and 'what would the composer's reaction be to the different ways they have understood it?'⁴

We bring our own agendas to what we hear, so the risk of my failing to understand what you, in good faith, have said to me, let alone what God has

said, is in the end too great to leave to words. No amount of telling gets the Word through. God had to try another way.

Part II

God had told his people what he had to say: *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”* *“I will be with you to the end of time.”* *“Follow me.”*

In the fullness of time, it became clear that the plan that God had had on hold from the beginning had now to be set in place. If it were his will to communicate fully through the human language, he would have to absorb himself in the human condition and show his people what he meant. For the nagging doubt was there, *“They will see and hear but never understand”* (Isaiah 6:9)

And so the Word became flesh. God’s people needed to see God’s love in action, because the telling was not enough. Daniel Barenboim, in his marvellous Reith Lectures last month, in which he posited the fascinating argument that music is a reflection of life, said, in his Chicago lecture, how much more we are governed today by the eye than by the ear.⁵ Aristotle had said that the eyes are the organs of temptation, and the ears are the organs of instruction. (*“Hear the word of God”*) Barenboim takes the argument further by suggesting that although the ear might have a considerable advantage over the eye, because it starts operating on the 45th day of pregnancy, presumably sensing the rhythm of the womb, while the eye can’t see a thing until days, maybe weeks after birth, we still respond more immediately to what we see than what we hear.⁶ Wagner, he told his audience, built the Bayreuth Theatre with the orchestra pit covered over, so that the audience would not be distracted by the sight of the players getting ready, and the ear would have to work harder to know when the music had begun.⁷ Our lives are governed more by sight than by hearing.

We know this to be true in the modern age of giant adverts and voyeurism, when the impact of sound is reduced to background muzak and sound bites. Interestingly enough, Barenboim, from his Jewish background, and with his musical insights, described what was in the Biblical beginning not as ‘a Word’ but sound – sound which came out of silence. Using the beginning of the prelude to Tristan and Isolde, he suggested that unless the silence was there first, the first note would have a completely different significance.⁸ Duncan

Forrester's Buddhist monk might be fascinated to hear that! Karl Barth, however, got there first with the same argument in relation to light and darkness. The positive effect of light is dependent on the negative aspect of darkness. And what more powerful way to communicate the Word than for sighted people at the General Assembly to watch a blind man's hands follow the Braille words of John 21, as he read to us from his sightless world during worship this week. But taking Barenboim's argument further, the light that came out of darkness on the first day clearly had more impact than the sound that came out of silence. So out of the silence came the Word, but out of the darkness, the Word became visible.

Hans von Balthazar wrote that 'God, in His supreme liberty, decided to adapt Himself to the modes of expression of His creature in order to reveal His divine depths, to pour out the abyss of His fullness into this other abyss of emptiness and need.'⁹ The human situation is described by Alan Lewis to great effect in his book, *Between Cross and Resurrection*. He refers to the contemporary scene thus: 'After two World Wars and many lesser conflicts, the Holocaust and other genocides, the new palpability of worldwide hunger, poverty and violence conveyed by modern media, and the measurable dying of the planet itself, the stench of death hangs over us all today as perhaps no previous generation.'¹⁰

Clearly God's attempt at communicating the Word verbally had not fully reached the target, and he had no option but to come into human flesh. And it is such an interesting twist to the tale to know that God chose to communicate his Law through a human being who was guilty of manslaughter, then to communicate with his special nation through twelve tribes, born out of a man who had deceived his brother, and finally to send his only Son, with the purpose of revealing Him as Father, into a human family which had its earliest roots in incest. God clearly knew something about communicating that human beings didn't.

But of course there was a welter of opposition. The minds that were set in tablets of stone could not take on board a Messiah who came from Galilee, let alone one who would be hung on a tree, and were astounded when the prophecy of Isaiah was declared to have been fulfilled in front of their noses. But how hard it was to see this. I am one of those people who, being vertically challenged, am often ignored! People come into shops after me, and are served before me. People walk past me, look at me, but fail to see me.

It happened to Jesus, the Word made flesh, described by Karl Barth as ‘the end and new beginning of all things’,¹¹ was not recognized. Even though he couched God’s message in terms which the people could understand, in stories of everyday life – bread and yeast, mustard seeds and farmers, sheep and swine, yet the hidden meanings were alien to their experience – the first being last, the greatest being the least, the sinner being the friend.

The message was, however, staring them in the face, as the blind, the lame, the deaf, the lepers and epileptics were all healed by a Word; the laws of nature were defied with a Word; death was conquered by the Word. And though many gathered round, too many were still not able, or not willing to see.

The most powerful visual message was the greatest scandal of all – the cross – a stumbling block to some, folly to others, ‘the place where history and life, legend and reality, time and eternity, intersect. There on the Cross, Jesus is nailed forever to show us how God would become a man and a man become God’ (Malcolm Muggeridge). Caiaphas, chief miscreant, voiced the classic double entendre when he declared, ‘It was necessary for one man to die for the people.’ (John 18:14) It was a gross misunderstanding from his point of view, but could not have been more accurate from God’s.

And so the Cross has taken pride of place next to the written Word. Churches built around its shape face the rising of the sun in the east to indicate the resurrection. And the anamnesis of the death stands as a visual portrayal of the mystery to communicate across boundaries of tradition, and barriers of language.

So God entrusts his very body and blood to the hands of the clergy – who, also understanding the mystery in different ways – enact the sacrament sometimes to the bewilderment of the very people with whom they are sharing the mystery. But then, that very mystery was always a candidate for misunderstanding down the centuries. To some of those on the outside with no Christian experience, these people were cannibals, eating flesh and blood; they were incestuous, loving their brothers and sisters. The blood of martyrs, from Stephen to Bonhoeffer, from Polycarp to Maximilian Kolbe, is evidence of the continued witness of and misunderstanding of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Internally, the church has laboured with its own debates – the divinity of Christ, the Logos as *sarx* or *anthropos* in the 4th Century, 19th Century heresies of people like Edward Irving who argued the fallen state of Christ’s human nature,

countered a few years later in J. McLeod Campbell's insistence that Christ ultimately showed us what it meant to be fully human – the subtle gloss that so many people fail to see, and the countless movements since the Reformation onwards which have argued across the barriers raised across the denominations and the theological spectrum.

Most of this is of course lost on those less erudite church-goers, many of whom live in the Borders, and some of whom remain simply confused about matters as basic as the intrinsic need for Jesus in the whole scheme of things. The trouble is that God put the Word into a human being, and that remains hard for many to understand.

So, walking along a road outside Jerusalem, two friends heard words from the scriptures, starting with the prophets, words which confused, from a person they did not know, Their minds, fixed on their tragedy that had happened a few days before, were unaware that the words they were hearing referred to the very things they had been talking about, but with a deeper meaning. And when the man broke the bread, the visual sign, their eyes were opening and he disappeared, leaving them with their new thoughts. 'This is my body, this is my blood.'

Part III

So if the attempt to get the message across to his creatures through the human language and in his Son's assumption of human flesh still left the communication incomplete, God had one more vehicle still to use – the very people he wanted to communicate with. How ironic that after the awesome mystery of the creation of the heavens and the earth, after the supremely self-giving act of incarnation and atonement, God's hardest work was yet to come – making human beings understand. Of course a faithful few were on board, but left to themselves, the human race might never have fully understood. God therefore harnessed the cosmic energy that had been around since the beginning of time, the power that had control over nature, that had brought the Word to action in human flesh, and used it to animate and influence the hidden depths of those whom he had made in his own image. A whole pile of bones sat up.

John Taylor, former Bishop of Winchester, described the transition thus: 'Life in the Spirit had been lived uniquely by the new man Jesus Christ, through the

total identification of his manhood with the Creator Spirit. But it did not end with that perfect life. Because of the solidarity of mankind something entirely new had entered the very nature of manhood itself.¹² This Go-Between God would surprise his creatures by creating a time and a place for his Word to be communicated to each:

- for Paul, blinded by the brilliance of the risen Christ, life-changing words were heard which before that moment would have meant nothing to him – ‘Saul, why are you persecuting me?’
- for Constantine, a cross in the sky which a moment before was simply a cloud formation in the sky, and the words, ‘By this sign conquer’, transformed a pagan emperor into a Christian champion.
- for Cuthbert on a hillside near Melrose, the vision of a soul being led to heaven in a shaft of light streaming from the sky, which moments before was the light of the moon, was the turning point of his life.
- for two friends at journey’s end in Emmaus, a man who earlier that afternoon had confused them by not knowing their news and by his greater knowledge, opened their eyes and how their hearts burned within them. Hindsight is a gift from God to bring greater understanding to the way God has already communicated, as in the words of Anselm, ‘I believe in order that I may understand.’¹³

At Pentecost, the Spirit mobilised the apostles into the church – a vehicle whose life-time commitment was to make the Word known, and be the body of Christ in the world. This was not a church built simply round Word and Sacrament, but a body enlivened by the Spirit’s ordering of the Word to life with sinews and muscles and a heart round its bones, the body of Christ. Alan Lewis calls it ‘the one organism, that community of members, which makes present, visible and concrete in the world – where it once lay buried, cold and lifeless in its bleeding and exhausted expiration – the body of Christ.’¹⁴

An old management saying is that ‘we remember 5% of what we hear, 25% of what we see, and 70% of what we do.’ It is the work of the Spirit to encourage us to be active, to put into action the Word we have heard and seen and in ways which we would never have believed possible, and in so doing communicating God’s message to all people. The spirit is not a standing-still God; it is the Go-between God, constantly moving between the unchanging God, those who

have taught us in sound traditional ways, and new believers, who have different understandings, different gifts, and different ways of doing things.

In the Holy Spirit, God comes inside our culture and works through the things that interest and excite us in order to effect the best communication. In every age, God opens doors and prepares new ways for us to walk along. Just as the printing press provided the opportunity for the Bible to be circulated to the ordinary people of the 15th Century in their own language, so the Internet Revolution has transformed our way of communicating and needs to be used. A whole generation of young people can now have a Bible verse texted to them every day on their mobile phone, the minister can enter into weekly web debates across the globe on the lectionary readings, and a church without a minister can have a sermon on a screen, the music for the hymns pre-recorded, the readings, typed out or spoken, along with the congregational roll – all delivered on an iPod.

The Spirit is too free to have a one-size-fits-all mentality. Modern innovations might make many people uncomfortable, but the first apostles were also discomfited as they were set on the path to build the church of which we are now the inheritors. God may speak to us in a Palestrina motet, or a Graham Kendrick song, in the detail of a Douglas Strachan window or a home-made pulpit fall, in the unpacking of a Marcan pericope in Greek, or in the Bible words writ large on a high screen, in the pure voice of a boy soprano singing 'Once in royal David's city', or in the rhythm of a keyboard.

For some, the experience of worship in a crammed cathedral with a glorious choir and vibrant expository preaching will be the new experience, for others a liturgical dance will provide the freedom to express their love for God, while puppets or Christian clowning will tell others the stories in a way they've never heard before, and for those no longer able to come to church, watching their familiar place of worship on a DVD will make them feel they still belong. The truth is that new ways will keep presenting themselves, in myriad forms, and when they do, we need to let God work. For we can tell people until we are blue in the face, we can show people for all we are worth, but until we allow the purpose of God, fired by the Holy Spirit, to open our minds and become part of us, in whatever way is right for taking God's Word forward, both for us and for the community around us, we will not be receiving the Word that has been communicated.

In the beginning, God created all these possibilities and more. And so for the moment, since the Word comes from God, and since God equips us to receive it, let us watch, listen and receive that Word as it comes to us in an image of today.

The address concluded with a multi-media presentation involving visual representations of the Hebrew, Greek and English versions of John 1:1 coupled with a musical setting composed and performed by the President.

1 Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1.

2 Hans von Balthazar, 'Parole de Dieu et Liturgie', paper given at the Third National Congress of the Centre de Pastorale Liturgique, 1958, Lex Orandi series, ed. Du Serf, (Strasbourg, 1958).

3 Janet Baker, *Full Circle*, 1982, p. 284.

4 Raymond Warren was Professor of Music at Bristol University, 1972-1994.

5 Daniel Barenboim, The Reith Lectures, First Lecture, 7 April 2006.

6 Ibid..

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Hans von Balthazar, loc.cit.

10 Alan Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection*, 2001, p.164.

11 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, p.120.

12 John Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London, 1972), p.106.

13 Anselm, *Proslogion*, I,1.

14 Alan Lewis, loc.cit., p.345.