

New Monasticism, some theological Reflections

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I have been tasked with the rekindling of a beautiful enormous Victorian church in Streatham Hill, St Margaret the Queen. A church that seats 850 people, with an assortment of rooms, two halls and a large plot of land and today Ian has asked me to share a few of the theological sources and impetuses for the things we are seeing to develop there. So what are we seeking to do? Firstly, we are seeking to build a new monastic house, for 12-14 young adults to come and live under a common rule, to pray and break bread together daily, to learn intensively the Christian tradition and its claims upon our contemporary social, political and economic life, and for them to serve in our local area and be hospitable to those in need and to be part of a parish church in our deanery. They would take yearly vows and potentially staying as long as they felt called to. Secondly, we are re-ordering our vast nave, to make space for a pre-school nursery, work with the elderly and vulnerable, wonderful café and coffee roastery, a food-bank, professional kitchen, youth-work, a bread and patisserie bakery, a library and community learning space, entrepreneurial hot-desking space, artist studios, an event space for concerts, spoken word and film evenings, and space for social and civic advice, even some bee keeping and mead making, partnering with those passionate about such things as we do so. All within a beautifully redesigned church, with new stained glass work and a reordered sanctuary and lady chapel. Thirdly, to pay for this we will build a small housing development on the land currently occupied by our halls (which we'd knock down).

So why these things? Why setup a new monastic community. Why now? Why at all? Well, Fr Benson, one of the founding members of The Society of St John the Evangelist, said this, "religious life is not to be seen as over and above ordinary Christian life, it is ordinary Christian life developed under conditions where the church has fallen away from her true spiritual calling of conscious and habitual union with Christ." Benson thought that the re-emergence of the religious life in 19th century England said as much about the failure of the then contemporary church to teach and live the faith as it did about the revival of something more ancient. For him part of this awaking was the enlivening of the intellectual life in religious life, which was necessary to truly be able to contemplate God. His anxiety was that the intellectual life of the church was also growing dim, people's defence of orthodoxy was defending the phrases rather than the meaning and understanding of things. He talked of gathering up the truth of past ages and maintaining that which sustains, that for which we would die, yet to also be open to the new truths of each passing age. Might we also say the same

thing today? Are we ever decreasing our expectations of those we catechise, baptise and confirm, are we accommodating ourselves to consumer culture and the notion of choice, and by doing so lessening the demands of the gospel? Benson certainly emphasised the cost of Christian discipleship, stating that “[w]e are not to think of a life of contemplation as if it were a tranquil life borne upon the wings of a dove, to abide in joyous vision and be at rest in God. There can be no rest except in proportion to the struggle, no vision except in proportion to the purification of heart, no purification except in proportion as the agony of Satanic conflict squeezes out the life-blood of our corrupt nature.” He understood that this was necessary, and indeed to offer the gospel without cost was cheap grace almost without worth. So for me the rise of what is termed new monasticism is not surprising in this age, it is one sign of the profound calling of God to His people to enter into the holy mystery of Christian community in an age when the church is struggling to provide places of intense Christian discipleship. The rekindling of the religious life says much about the potential for a renewal of our common life. We are seeing so many young people emerge with an intense longing for the truths of Christian life, a longing for that intensity of life which Fr Benson vividly speaks about.

Yet what from this form of life leads us out into the world, what form might a catholic missiology take? Why is St Margaret’s hosting such a multitude of people and things?

A good starting point to begin to answer those questions is William Temple’s incarnational theology of creation which he drew from Maximus the Confessor’s work. Temple, in his much neglected philosophical works, anticipates many of the theological moves of nouvelle theology, in these works he sketches out a thoroughgoing sacramental and cosmic vision for the life of the church and the world. Drawing upon the theology of the Oxford Movement he saw the incarnation as a point of radical rupture, reframing the whole of the material order as potentially sacramental. Christ incarnate, God in materiality, brings the divine life within the whole of time and all of the material order. Any radical distinction between nature and grace is removed. Temple expands the Pauline Ephesian vision that all things are caught up in Christ, that the ultimate telos of creation is participation in the divine life through the redemptive work of Christ. The sacraments are the ‘guarantee’ of that work, of this new material reality. That Christ is fully present in bread and wine is a taste of the end of all things, and this vision filters ever outward into the whole of creation. The eucharist is therefore not just for believers, it is a sign of a changed order, for all things are potentially iconic to the divine life, all things are potentially sacraments. Temple understood that when we sing, “when sacraments shall cease”, it is not because they end but because all things become sacramental.

He also saw the social, political and economic meaning of this. That nothing was therefore beyond the redemptive scope of Christ. All things, all people, all places, throughout history were involved in the cosmic purposes of God in Christ. In his own time the spectre of industrialisation and its concomitant effects upon human flourishing and wellbeing were the central things to which he brought this sacramental gaze. The church was called to exhibit that form of divine life to which baptism and the eucharist point. So he worked with the trade unions, on the post-war settlement with Germany, water rights, educational provision for all, voting rights, shelter and housing provision, technology and the market, monetary policy, wider access to the arts, these were all concerns of his.

Yet I feel we need one other voice that enlivens Temple's vision, that of von Balthasar, whose *Theology Aesthetics* is perhaps the most unread of all works on the bookshelves of the ordinands I was with at Westcott House. Yet in that vast multi-volume work lies some deep missiological thought. He sought to repair a rupture in much modern, and neo-Thomistic theology. Balthasar sought to recapture the Neo-platonic vision that so many patristic writers inhabited. Writers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus, Augustine, Bonaventure, Anselm, St John of the Cross, and Pseudo-Dionysius, shared a common vision of the Being of God. That God in God-self was Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. His work was an attempt to place beauty back into the life of the Church. He argued that neo-Thomistic theology had actually succumbed to enlightenment rationale, in that it had over emphasised truth and the good at the expense of beauty. Balthasar also saw this rupture as an essential characteristic of protestant theology, which emphasised knowing the truth and doing the good. It is not surprising, he stated, that culture in modernity was often utilitarian in its philosophy, with industrial processes being the embodiment of this. Human dignity was reduced to a hollow core of mechanisation. He argued that neo-Thomistic theology and much protestant theology deprived people of beauty, of that which profoundly moves, that elicits emotion and experience of God. In short it presented God as something to be taught and understood rather than a mystery to be entered into. In 20th century theology we can see the growth of the charismatic movement and pentecostal theology partly in the light of this loss. Balthasar finds the locus of beauty in the incarnation, expressly in the transfiguration, an event that for him summarises the Christological centre point to his aethetical theology. Christ is the very embodiment of beauty, truth and goodness. Yet in Christ is found both that which harrows and is ultimately transfigured (his wounds from his passion) which is one way of resisting simple commodified visions of beauty that our own culture seems enraptured with. It forces us to consider beauty within that which culturally is seen as ugly. Balthasar's theology rounds out much of the dryness that theology can sometimes communicate. His emphasis

on experience as an essential part of faith, of joy, of being enraptured, captures something profound, that has a rich history within much Anglo-catholic theology. Think of Charles Lowder processing the blessed sacrament in the East End, convinced that its beauty and splendour would convert people, even if they did not understand the truth of it. It is this sort of theology that undergirds catholic liturgical and devotional practise, and also guided much of the architectural ecclesial vision of the Victorian period. Yet I feel we Temple to compliment and expand von Balthasar's argument, seeing the world as a potential bearer of the beauty and majesty of God, this does not dim its Christological focus, but deepens it.

So what I am suggesting is a combination of Temple's sacramental ecclesiology and cosmic theology with Balthasar's neo-platonic patristic vision of the true, the good and the beautiful. This leads to a very broad sense of partnership in mission, with all those who are seeking the good, the true and the beautiful. It opens up into a wide vista that suggests that the Kingdom of God is not to be collapsed into the Church, but rather is as wide as the universe itself. It is a vision that suggests the truth shall set you free and saves you, the good sets you free and saves you, is expanded to include beauty sets you free and saves you. Balthasar's thick description of the life of the church is one which is compellingly rich and broad, it is also risky because it is not strictly delimited or binary, combined with Temple's cosmic sacramental theology, it results in a wondrous, numinous and mysterious missiology.

They each in their own time wrestled with how much the church is open to the life of the world, in Balthasar's time it was a wrestling with the new criticism or historical critical method, and modernity, for Temple it was industrialisation, the rise of technology and individualism, so we must be open to the questions and directions of the world, affirming, critiquing and enlivening them. As Gore wrote in his preface to *Lux Mundi* the Church is continually called to bring forth treasures old and treasures new, that which it holds dear which has guided it, and that which the Spirit stirs anew, both within and without the church. We've talked about what some of those treasures old might be, the gifts of Benson, Balthasar and Temple (and the multitude of sources they each draw upon, particularly the patristic witness). So what of our context today, what of possible treasures new? I want now to turn to the work of Bauman before concluding.

Zygmunt Bauman is one guide through the maze of our present contemporary context. He is a mature critical social theorist of the standing of Giddens, Beck and Habermas. His major thesis is trying understand the nature of contemporary western society through the metaphor of liquid modernity. For him we are still an indelibly modern society, yet one in which the solid structures that have guided us since the enlightenment period are liquifying, collapsing, becoming

more and more difficult to fix and understand. The previous solidity of institutions (governmental, societies, neighbourhoods...) is no longer the case, the state, the family, political parties, relationships, jobs, risk, security, freedom, all are fluid, ever changing. The main ideology that drives this is consumer culture, the commodification of all things. Whereas previously we might understand consumer culture to merely apply to goods, we now understand much of our social, political and economic life through this ideology. Relationships and jobs are commodified and disposable, where we live likewise, our legal system enshrines disposability and non-commitment. Often those in the lowest rungs of society bear the brunt of this utilitarian thinking, zero hours contracts embody this principal, human beings are simply commodities to be deployed or disposed of. More and more within our society the only individuals who do have the ability to chose are those who are well off enough to do so. This results in a society which is also aligned to fear. Fear of the other, of the strange. In a commodified society you do not need to deal with difference you can choose to be with those like you, therefore the stranger and the strange can be cast as evil. Think of the way in which the politics of difference and the rights to contain difference have dominated our political debate this last century and think also of the recent debates about immigration.

Ok, so that is a very shorthand and negative reading of our context. What of the church? What of St Margaret's? Several theologians have been alert at the way in which church polity itself has succumb to this consumer impulse. Fresh Expressions could be said to be entirely bound to a consumer orientated vision of ecclesial life, pick and choose, being with people like you. Yet we desperately need to offer a vision of human flourishing, most especially in our cities. A vision of catholicity - that is of the flourishing of difference, where those of much and those of little come and experience life together, not reconciled because of their common interest or culture but because of Christ. This is why at St Margaret's we are playing host to such an array of things and activities, we are attempting to embody a vision of human flourishing, where people find dignity in work, are paid a London living wage, where arts, culture and beauty are celebrated and encountered, where those who are considered least are not relegated to a side room but are as welcome as anyone else. Where the very fabric of the building speaks of the beauty and sanctity of God and of the material order. Yet where the heart of things is still the praying, serving and learning Christian community, where the mass is the orientating point for all this, and the origin of St Margaret's missiological sensibility. A community that commits to one another, that desires a depth and intensity of relationship. In many ways it is a re-appropriation of certain forms of mediaeval monasticism, particularly that in Northern England and Ireland. Where you see so many concentric circular walls expanding outward. In the centre the chapel, the

rhythm of prayer and devotion, around this the brothers or sisters lived, around this the schools, artisans and guilds, around this the people and finally even the livestock. All things caught up in Christ, the centre point of it all, whether recognised and acknowledged or not. It is this profound vision that Fr Benson speaks of, that Temple and Balthasar elucidate that I desperately pray that St Margaret's might offer people a taste of that they too may see and know and love Christ.