

Envisaging the future, the church of tomorrow

(Notes of a talk by Peter Lynas of Evangelical Alliance (N.I.) given at Headway (Methodist Evangelicals Together) Breakfast, Lisburn, 17th June 2017)

Proverbs 4v18: "But the path of the righteous is like the light of the dawn, which shines brighter and brighter till the full light of day."

1. The culture around us

We live in a post-truth world which creates both opportunities and challenges for us as people of the Truth. This talk will look at how the larger cultural context is changing and how it influences our engagement with the civic leadership of our town or cities. Many have commented that we are in a post-truth society following the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit vote which preceded it. In fact 'post-truth' has been named the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionaries. Post-truth is defined as: "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

Post-modernism describes the idea in which there is apparently no such thing as absolute truth and everyone just has their own story or truth. Christians have always cautioned about where this leads. If there is no truth, language loses meaning, marriage can be re-defined, the beginning and end of life blurred, people are categorised and boxed by an equalities agenda, rights are separated from responsibilities, trust disappears and community disintegrates. If we cannot agree on terms and have no shared language it becomes impossible to have conversations and there is no trust.

This is nothing new. In John 18: 33-38 Pilate asks Jesus "What is truth?" Tom Wright describes Pilate as the first post-modernist! We live in a society which doesn't know what truth is and maybe isn't sure if it wants truth.

In Daniel 1:1-21 Daniel was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar's troops. Daniel and friends studied the language and culture of Babylon and this enabled them to serve and shape Babylonian culture as Daniel rose to be a very good senior official, satrap or special adviser. You could say that they were enrolled in a three year degree/master's programme about Babylonian language and culture. Some of us have done the same in our chosen field. We have spent years getting qualifications and experience. What about our growth in the things of the faith? Why spend years training to be a lawyer and leave your faith at Sunday School level? So I love the story of Daniel when it comes to thinking about the public square. It helps me think about the issues of **identity, purpose and power**.

2. Identity – who am I?

Story shapes who you are. Daniel knows his shaping story. We read in Daniel 1:8 that Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the King's food and wine. Daniel knew that in order to influence culture through redemptive participation, he needed to have a deep-rooted sense of identity in his relationship with God. He knew the story that formed him. He came to the conclusion which was something like: "I will learn your language and culture, even take on a new name, but I will not eat the food from the King's table that has been offered to idols. I will not pledge my allegiance to false gods – I will not lose my identity."

Same-sex relationships

The same sex question is less about relationships and more about identity; it is not about who you sleep with, but who you are. Tim Farron MP and ex-Leader of the Liberal Democrats, found himself torn between living as a faithful Christian and serving as a political leader. David Laws, a former colleague of Farron, has now weighed in to the debate saying something like: “tolerance is not enough to be a Liberal, you must respect me.” It is a subtle but significant shift. It reflects a desire to control what people think or even feel. Tim Farron tried the “my faith is private” line to no avail. He tried to prove his Liberal credentials by voting to re-define marriage and support gay rights, but this was not enough. He was pursued for what he believes. He was relentlessly asked a theological question (“Is gay sex a sin”) by people who don’t believe in God, sin or theology. In the end he gave in and denied that gay sex is a sin, but that still wasn’t enough. (He should have asked “what do you mean by sin?” or “Do you believe in God”)? Ruth Davidson, leader of the Scottish Conservatives announced that she ~~put~~ LGBTI rights above the Conservative Party. Nobody blinked. Farron tried to hold the two together and ended up resigning.

Nowadays the battle is less with culture and more often heard in the Church. A post-modern mind-set has moved within the church. Post-modernism has moved the notion of meaning from the text to the individual; authority is questioned but authenticity is revered as real. There has however been a shift in this conversation with the emergence of the group calling themselves “Living Out” – exploring story and theology (www.livingout.org). Some powerful evangelical voices have emerged within the Church of England, who are “same-sex attracted” and at the same time obedient to the teaching of the Bible. Their leaders are theologians like Vaughan Roberts, Ed Shaw and Sam Alberry. They are a “third way” in the present debate and have stirred the General Synod. This is a glimpse of encouragement.

Transgender

This is also an identity question. It has its basis in the notion that truth is situational (that it is rooted in me) and I can create my own basis for truth. Studies about Queer Theory reveal an undermining of modernism, intellectual thought and logical response. There are different approaches to the issue. One approach says: “I have male genitalia but I feel like a woman and I want to transition from male to female. This binary approach presupposes that there is such a category as male or female. Another approach is non-binary which accepts an identity as gender-queer and claims that the very categories of male and female no longer exist. The obliteration of gender is their goal. There are inherent contradictions in the deconstructionist ideology underlying queer theory. Such contradictions are acceptable to this viewpoint. It seems that they are all part of a strategy to undermine (deconstruct) the walls of the city in order to conquer it.

We now are encountering a more aggressive stance which suggests that to refuse my identity is offensive to me, an example of hate-speech and extremism and is an act of violence against me. At its heart is a rejection of external authority and help, and a turning inwards. Pastorally this is dangerous. Formerly blame could be laid at those who claimed external authority (like the church). But now, if I am the source of my own authority and it fails me, then I am the only one to blame. This poses a serious difficulty for pastoral counsellors who have witnessed an increase in instances of self-harm and suicides.

I offer two pieces of advice in this area. First, if you have met one transgender person, you have met one transgender person. There is no universal experience. It is not easy to generalise. This is an issue in schools. Secondly, don’t confuse an ideological and a pastoral response. Most transgender

people are not fighting a cultural war but are pursuing a personal journey. Yet there is an ideological issue. We need to learn to line up both these issues appropriately.

Nationalism

The rise in Nationalism is a further outworking of the search for identity. In one sense it never went away in Ireland. It is rising in the USA and parts of Europe. Scottish nationalism is notable and also EVEL (English votes for English laws).

So what does this look like for the church?

- i) William Wilberforce loved the Methodist Sunday School but wasn't allowed to attend such an idiosyncratic, slightly weird bunch, because his parents thought that he would have been ostracised and regarded as an outsider. We will be ostracised again. We need to be OK with that. Our role is not to be loved by others but to love the other.
- ii) We must lift the gnostic veil on things like Instagram where people want to live false lives. Christians need to become authentic story tellers. The Irish are story-tellers, it is in our bones.
- iii) We must be clear what gospel we are preaching. We must beware of shrinking the gospel and decline the half story and share the full story. We are in danger of moving from the great themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration to a simplistic "Jesus loves you" message. The gospel message is not only about inviting Jesus into my heart, but it is God inviting me into His ongoing story. We sometimes present a very individualistic, simplistic gospel which does work to an extent. Yet the gospel does have a cultural carry as well as an individual carry. We have a larger story, a better narrative, a meta-narrative that can include the smaller stories of many today. Glynn Harrison has written "A better story – God, sex and human flourishing." People want community without commitment. We will stand on the margins offering both.

Let me return to Farron. This was an example of the classic liberal bait and switch. The argument is to change law and policy to respect people's personal choices. But once the law is changed, something Farron supported, traditional views are marginalised and alienated, with David Laws calling Farron's views prejudiced. In the end Farron resigned because "to live as a committed Christian, to hold faithfully to the Bible's teaching, has felt impossible for me." He went on to say that, "We are kidding ourselves if we think we yet live in a tolerant, liberal society." Ironically, Tim Farron was too liberal for the Liberal Democrats. But in the end, faith won because freedom of thought and belief is unstoppable. The resurrection changes everything. The freedom it brings compelled Tim Farron to lay down his political career for the One Who had given everything for him. He put faith first and finished his resignation statement with the words of Isaac Watts's great hymn: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life my all."

3. Purpose – why we must do what we do.

God isn't interested in outcomes, but in why we do what we do. Daniel resolved not to defile himself. Daniel had an education put on him, a name put on him but he resolved not to partake of the King's food. He is a beacon of hope for Christians. Our purpose, like the Israelites in exile, is to seek "shalom" or peace or wholeness. Eugene Peterson defines shalom as "seeking the dynamic vibrating health of a society that pulses with divinely directed purpose and surges with life transforming love". For this purpose we are created, called and commissioned.

Work

We must re-imagine work. At the Reformation, Luther spoke of a double calling; the spiritual calling to all to follow Christ and the external call to work out that calling where we are. Ideally we could abolish the layity-clergy divide and regard each person as having a call to work on the front line.

Ageing population

David Willetts has written “The Pinch” about the massive implications on public spending on an aging population. There is an inter-generational fracture. I have met retired nurses and retired teachers but never a retired person. Older people can use their experience to get others started. It is possible to have a sense of purpose without paid work. The Church has social capital that is intergenerational and socially and economically mixed.

Artificial intelligence

Christians need to study the spread of Artificial Intelligence. Jim Houston the founder of Regent College, Vancouver at 94 years of age is engaging Francis Collins, formerly of the human genome project, to study the impact of Artificial Intelligence. 30% of current jobs may not exist in 20 years’ time. What will be the impact on people’s sense of purpose and self-worth? This has an impact on our understanding of spirituality.

Technology

Technology is deforming our bodies so there is the phenomenon of “tech neck.” Technology is deforming our minds with information overload. For our bodies we need to manage the intake of calories. For our minds we will need to learn to manage information calories and avoid “fatty minds!” Social media can filter living and distort real relationships. Social media can release in us a chemical dopamine which makes us feel good. With social media we can do relationships differently and some people are not used to real life injection. Managing millennials is a real challenge. There is the danger of inhabiting an Echo chamber where everyone is in agreement but it is not the real world where we struggle to cope with competing ideas.

Church

Beware consumerism. You can’t just copy a form of doing church (e.g. styling a church like a shopping mall) and use it in church. We should not be surprised if congregations, like consumers, say “I didn’t get anything out of that.” Containers aren’t neutral. Holy Communion is the ultimate stand against a consumer culture. It is a meal without a menu. It is for gathered people who then become scattered servants.

Jamie Smyth (“You are what you love”) observes our liturgies and habits. Smyth describes the basic structure of Christian liturgy, as gathering, listening, communion and sending. We are narrated into God’s story. “And it is the story of which I’m a part, in which I’m a character, that determines just what counts as character, as virtue.”

We become “Kingdom carriers.” Gordon McDonald tells the story of a converted bus driver on the Manhattan commute. When asked about how his conversion affected his work he said that I welcome people on to the bus; I drive more carefully; as the passengers leave I say “God bless you. Have a good day.” A lady came to me and said “This bus drive is my daily sanctuary.” [And so the bus drivers work became an act of worship.](#)

4. Power and authority – how do we do it?

There are two areas in which the Church is growing: the more reformed and the more charismatic. A local Bishop has said: "the liberal church is both impotent and infertile."

Daniel excelled and was given power. Excellence paves the way for influence. Daniel and his friends were found to be ten times wiser than the magicians and enchanters. It didn't come easily but after three years of water and vegetables! Note, in passing, that Daniel was part of a small but dedicated group. He had others around him. I'm sure lots of other people ate the King's rich fatty food and drank his excellent wine. God gave Daniel and his mates, knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom. Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. There was this wonderful integration of the cultural and the supernatural that was incredibly powerful. People who can see and respond culturally and supernaturally, stand out. The more godless the culture, the more need for the Spirit. Canadian Charles Taylor has written that five hundred years ago it was unthinkable to not believe in God, whereas now it is becoming unthinkable to believe in God. Apparently we are in a more rational, logical and scientific world. Yet we meet people who do not believe in God and who think that belief in God is unthinkable, while simultaneously watching programmes with a sci-fi or supernatural aspects to them like: Game of Thrones, True Blood and Vampire Diaries. Popular programmes delve into transcendence or the occult. In Northern Ireland 20% go to church and 70% get married in church because people hope and want there to be something transcendent at that moment. Nearly all funerals happen in churches and even those which don't tend to look like a church service. Watch the response to tragedies like Grenfell Tower fire, the murder of Jo Cox MP. The tree in the centre of the school in response to the death of Jo Cox was a "Prayer tree." Following the terrorist attacks in Paris, London and Manchester the hash tag was "Pray for..." Paris, London, Manchester. People did not put up a hash tag: "Random collection of cells has degenerated and will reform in a new collection of cells." Many are more open to the transcendent than they are prepared to admit. People are seeking the Divine and yet the churches seem reluctant to offer it! Julian Barnes, an atheist, in his book "Nothing to be frightened of" has written: "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." How many in our culture are saying something similar?

Millennials

Millennials think differently. In general they have lower self-esteem and weaker coping mechanisms. They are impatient because they have grown up with instant gratification. They prefer story and experience over facts. That's OK. How many of you became a Christian because of facts? How many have stayed a Christian because of facts? It is the case for some but not all. The reformation led to a flattening of the world. We were treated as brains on sticks and our churches became too much like lecture halls. We, including the churches, have removed a sense of mystery and transcendence. Christianity is not about thirty minutes of intellectual download. What affects us is experience of Christ and the story and reality of encountering Jesus in the reality of our lives. Too often the church seeks our heads while the world seeks our hearts as the advertising campaigns of firms like Nike or Victoria's secret reveal (the one appeals to our competitiveness and the other to our lust.)

Belief is up for grabs. C Taylor speaks of the fragilisation of belief. Everything is contested. Everyone in a secular age is going to feel this cross pressure experience. We are going to feel pushed and pressed and tugged by alternative rival stories of who we are and what we are here for. As believers we are tempted to doubt, likewise unbelievers are subject to cross pressures and are tempted to believe. The economic framework doesn't convince people anymore since the crash. The political framework is disappointing.

Church

Church is moving from the mainstream to the margins- but that's OK. Nominalism is dying and soon those in our churches will only be there because they have actually chosen to be there. We will witness where we work and pray for those we meet.

Ephesians 1: 20-23 (The Message) *"All this energy issues from Christ: God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the centre of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence."*

Identity – the gospel story shapes us; **Purpose**- as scattered servants we seek shalom for everyone; **Power**- we combine the wisdom of the world and the dimension of the divine.

The Battle has already been fought and we know who wins. As we progress we see a little further. Who knows exactly what the future of the church looks like? I know this, that we are on the winning side. Let us do our bit to get as many others to join us as we can.