

# A RESPONSE TO THE LACE WEEKEND WITH FATHER TOM HAMILL

by Bella Harding

For October's LACE Weekend, we plunged into the deep-end of serious Bible reflection and spiritual challenge. It sent me back to reading the Bible with an intense and questioning approach that has been very fruitful, if also at times disturbing. I am sure others are better qualified than I am to comment on this. However, what intrigues me is the question we raised at the weekend and never covered, which is 'how do we present this for our classes?' and I wanted to share what experience I have had, teaching in a sixth form college, so that others also share how they have developed their teaching through this.

My first and most interesting experiment has been to ask everyone I could, students and staff, 'who was thrown out of the Garden of Eden?' Universally I have met with the assumption that it was the couple, and yet no one has been able to interpret the actual text to say that. In immediately succeeding verses, of course, Eve is assumed to be with Adam, and so there is a paradox. I have no answer to this. However, the effect is to send people to study the text because they are intrigued. The Bible cannot be seen as a two dimensional, erroneous scientific account. It has to be working on another level, and it engages people not in the way the 'Bible Code' claims to do, but in a genuinely productive way. This proves the point that we read the Bible all too often through the theologies that have been constructed around it, and too rarely do we interrogate the text for what it actually says. Yet people through the ages have died in order to preserve the text as it is, and how can we teach unless we know its depth?

Another point that has struck me as I look at the Bible, is the extent to which the Bible is interdependent. Each story, each psalm is written with the assumption of knowledge of many other stories embedded in it. Once you start to read the Bible like this, there are many resonances in every verse, especially in the Gospel, and the resonances give depth and nuances to the text. It is like a huge symphony, in which themes are reiterated and developed and repeated in a minor key. Half the point is lost if you do not recognise the theme. It makes me think how important story is to us as people, and how important story is in teaching. It is also tragic that so few of these stories are known to the generation that I teach, so that much of what they do read from the Bible lacks depth and context. We need to rediscover ways of telling Bible stories, so that they are familiar enough to be available for later reflection.

These days, I do not find many students that read outside their courses, yet most of them spend hours every night absorbing stories of various kinds, at the films or on television and video. Even the format of documentaries is increasingly that of story. What are we absorbing from these stories? I was glad to hear my children have recently rejected *Casualty* as 'boring, as the formula is always the same'. Many of the soaps have a 'teaching' about life that gives each one its particular type, and then this is developed through the unfortunate lives of the puppet characters, that can be made to suffer anything and still be able to talk about it. Our hearts are not being fed by these stories, as they are too trivial for the most part in their approach to the problems people face, although they can present the politically correct attitude or challenge prejudice, and they can be used to inform about ways of coping. These are the stories our pupils are absorbing.

The characters in the Bible do not lack problems, and sometimes go for outrageous solutions, but the individuals are far more real in the way they are really changed by their experiences. David is an obvious example, where his life has tremendous dramas and temptations, and yet his response is uniquely his own. He is not a puppet constructed to prove a point and so we can learn more deeply from his experience.

One of Father Tom's challenging statements was to say that the gods of the ancient mythologies, the gods that the days of the week remain named after, the gods categorised in the other nine prohibitions of the ten commandments (after "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods but me"), these gods are still around, as influences on people's behaviour. We might prefer to call them Jungian archetypes, but they are the irrational urges in human society, which cannot be dealt with rationally. They must be brought under the understanding of God. With this in view, what ancient gods are being activated in shows such as *Blind Date* or *Robot Wars*? Each of these gods proffers a different form of salvation, which is to die in the service of the god. How many gods require our unquestioning obedience, and how can we encourage our students to

recognise this and to fight it? Here I see theological education, by teaching them to think for themselves is actually coming close to the corruption of the young that Socrates was accused of.

We live in an age when gender issues are the subject of huge controversy. What is it to be male, to be female, what roles are appropriate to each? The Bible also wrestles with these questions, and in parts comes up with some to me very distressing approaches. If we take the Total Bible, as Tom Hamill was wishing us to do, we have to look at such events as the massacre of Numbers 31, the crime of the men of Gibeah and others, and we have to work out what is being said. Part of Tom's thesis was that there are three strands in 'God' of the Bible, none of which relate exactly to the 'God' of philosophy/theology, nor encompass God Himself. The 'God' of Temple, Wilderness and Garden is in each case different, with different concerns, different rituals that define what it is. None of these are identifiable with God, who escapes all categories, but we must know and understand the human expression of God that we are quoting and relying on. It gives an awesome and humbling account of why 'good Christians' have gone out to war in such appalling self-righteousness. As I understood it, each aspect relates to an aspect of our human psyche, the concern for order, the concern for justice and the concern for freedom, but to say the least, there have been times when the balance has been wrong.

At a sixth form level, I find it better to admit the sins of the Church, the mistakes of past and present and the ongoing struggle each one of us has, than to try to ignore the difficulties. What I have found distressing is that almost universally the students see the Church in the terms of Temple, of rules, order and compelled obedience. The success of a retreat centre such as St Cassian's is precisely that it begins to open to them the concepts of freedom and justice.

But why should such experience be near universal? In part it is to do with the very process of growing up. As a child reaches adolescence, so she or he begins to feel themselves capable of independent life and resentful of every form of restriction that in earlier years kept them safe. Even if they have been given glimpses of the 'God' concerned with justice and with freedom, it is developmentally necessary that they engage in a struggle with the 'God' of Temple, in order to complete the process of maturity, where each element has its place and its function.

It seems to me that the way to help them is to accompany them on their journey, to assure them that this wrestling is not only necessary but good, and that the 'God' of the Temple does not exhaust God at all. This is far more productive than the classic two responses, either to insist that the urgent reservations being expressed have no foundation at all, the traditional approach, or to agree totally with every criticism, whether well or ill-founded, the liberal one. If we can give students a glimpse of the importance, a taste for the excitement of the search for God, (who searches us out first) then we are preparing them for their life as adult Christians.

When I had the temerity to suggest this article, Brother Terry suggested that the ideas of the students themselves would be good to include. I teach (apart from Philosophy A-Level) a general theology to students once a week, which covers a vast range of topics. I cannot think of particular insights the students have shared this week, but I am convinced that the atmosphere has been more open for debate, that they have been more able to express the anxieties and conflicts they feel than before. My attitude has been a mixture of apologist and philosopher, and sometimes the balance between them is wrong. This past week, I have been more interested in letting the students do the thinking for themselves. I learnt the value of stillness and silence. I know that the questions go on working their way out long after the students have left the classroom. All I can hope to do is to have started them constructively.

Obviously the teaching of sixth-formers is quite different to pupils lower down the school. But at every level, we still have to meet the challenge of helping them to grow up in their faith. Most telling of all from the weekend was to examine what 'God' it is that I embody, because actually this is the 'God' that the students pick up. And in the context of school rules, conformity and socialisation, is it any wonder that they can see teachers embodying 'Temple', values. This raises the uncomfortable question of what education is actually for, in this age of target setting, league tables, etc. Etc.

The beauty of the Lasallian ideal, the ideal of all Christian educators, and even of Plato, is that it concerns itself with the person, beyond all utilitarian considerations, with the releasing in the person of all that is already there. It is a hard ideal to maintain amid current trends, but essential for them as individuals and for us all. There have been profound thinkers in the last century, that have changed forever the way that we think. One impression that sixth-formers have is that there have been no such thinkers in the Church. We need such thinkers, in order to express the eternal truths in ways that are accessible to our age, that reflect the understanding of our age. My thanks to Father Tom and to Terry for starting such a serious reflection this weekend.