



A contemporary perspective on mission: The blue flower

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Everything we experience is a *communication*.¹

Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg)

This essay seeks to identify a problem in current understanding of the aim and method of Christian evangelism and to propose an alternative approach, which is aesthetic and responsive to cultural production. It is focused around two images: a bottle and a blue flower. The flower is owed to the fragmentary writings of Novalis, a German philosopher and poet of the Romantic period, and it is to the Romantic response to Enlightenment rationalism that I look for resources to respond to the rationalism and instrumentalism newly resurgent in today's world, and by which the Christian churches are themselves influenced in their understanding of communication.

Here are some words by a representative of the Church of Scotland, speaking from the Mission and Discipleship Council: 'The church is always reinventing itself. [...] The gospel is the same, the message is the same, but how we communicate it has to change as culture and society changes.'² To some extent, these words are obviously true: how we speak determines how we will be understood. Tradition, in order to be faithful, will develop and find new modes of communication. Yet these emerge from the practices of the tradition itself, and are not extrinsic to it. Like much discourse about mission today, this statement assumes a sharp separation between form and content: communication and message. This approach characterises influential reports, such as the Church of England report, *Mission-Shaped Church*, which makes a similar separation between the message and

its communication, using the language of clothing: ‘the gospel may have many clothes but there is only one gospel’.³ That the clothes are disposable is made clear: ‘There is a fabric of the old way of being society and being church. We are not about patching the fabric of that old garment but seeking to set up a new loom to weave the new fabric for tomorrow’s society of the kingdom.’⁴ In this model the gospel is a message put in a bottle, or a body in various outfits, and it can be removed and transferred to different bottles or clothes according to the tastes of those to whom it is sent. Such a model also suggests that the gospel can come, unmediated by interpretation, fresh from scripture, as if the preceding centuries of interpretation had never happened. It therefore disenfranchises those whom it seeks to reach, for it denies them the fellowship and wisdom of the whole Christian community up to that point. It suggests a divorce between form and content that is wholly counter to the embrace of materiality and particularity of the Incarnation.

The use of the word ‘mission’, nowadays embraced by Catholics as well as Protestants, encourages this instrumental approach to the medium of communication. For ‘mission’, a noun used only a handful of times in the Bible, is content-free.⁵ Anything could be sent in theory. Its use in Christian discourse is relatively recent, and is used often to separate God’s mission from the Church as the mediation of mission.⁶ For Moltmann, for example, ‘It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil to the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church’.⁷ The older word, evangelism, is not content-free or separated from the Church: it expresses the *process* of communicating the good news, which is already implicit in the word ‘gospel’: the good news of Jesus Christ, king of the universe. For ‘gospel’ was the word used for an imperial proclamation in the ancient world, especially announcing a new emperor and commanding response.⁸ The angel uses this language to the shepherds in Luke 2:10: ‘*euangelizomai*’, meaning ‘I bring glad tidings,’ all conveyed in that one verb.

The noun ‘evangelism’ then, which describes the activity of gosselling, unites medium and content as is wholly appropriate for a message that is not an idea but a person. It is difficult to stop my students in Religion and Literature classes from writing about

the Christian ‘message’ in this disembodied way, as if it were the answer to a question in a pub quiz or an improving moral. A message is precisely not what God gives us. In G. K. Chesterton’s fantastic story of nihilism, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, published a century ago but fresh as paint, the character Sunday is chased across London and the Home Counties by a series of metaphysical policemen, who all want the answer to who he really is: detective or criminal? He runs off, stealing an elephant from the zoo and galumphing through North London, while leaving behind a series of messages: ‘*Fly at once. The truth about your trouser-stretchers is known.—A Friend*’, or ‘The word, I fancy, should be “pink”’.⁹ That for Chesterton is the nightmare: a God who sends gnomic messages and leads humanity on a wild goose chase. His character of Sunday is not exactly God, but the world seen by us in our darkest moments as an absurd puzzle. Christ may be a mystery, but he is an embodied mystery, and coming to know and love him initiates an eternal quest where desire is satisfied even as it is increased.

If we believe that our duty to communicate the gospel is to show Christ, then we cannot strip the gospel of its embodiment. As the prayer attributed to St Teresa reminds us:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.¹⁰

Ours is the task of evangelism but equally we are also the good news: that in Christ we Christians find forgiveness and new life in the Church. We are the body of Christ: ‘For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit’ (1 Cor 12:13). The translation used here is the Authorised because it preserves the sense of union better than any other, as the believers ‘drink into’ the Holy Spirit. So evangelism, like charity, begins at home. We cannot separate Christian formation and evangelism. A recent study by the University of Lancaster found that churchgoers are not necessarily adherents of the teaching of their church.¹¹ What that

suggests is that they are not being taught, resourced, or encouraged to discuss and debate the very issues that affect discipleship, such as the way we treat the dying, or economics. Instead, lay people are very often being patronised and given vague moral uplift rather than meaty content. You can preach about love until you are blue in the face but without showing how it is lived in difficult, challenging circumstances it becomes sentimentality. Challenged on all sides by the hegemony of the New Atheism, how are we helping Christians to give a reasoned account of the faith that is in them?

What I am suggesting therefore, is that evangelism has to be embodied, to be both by and to the whole Church, and to unite formation, apologetics and evangelism. An Italian high school teacher and priest, Luigi Giussani, founder of the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation, calls it ‘proposing’ Christianity as an encounter with the coming of Jesus: ‘Externally, the only answer is that one has an encounter with a presence that is different; that one bumps into a different presence; and this presence, then, can act as a reagent, as a catalyst of energies that up till now were absconding.’¹² And this encounter is mediated: ‘The reawakening of memory happens in company with somebody, who already lives this memory. There are no other solutions. We must multiply these presences. The Bible says: “To every man God has given responsibility for his brother”’.¹³

Mission here is not so much about sending as ‘coming’ and abiding: ‘I have come so that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ as Christ says in John 10:10. Coming involves an encounter, as the soul meets a mystery that answers to its deepest desires: to our reason, to our body and spirit, to the infinite in humanity. It involves revealing to people that their deepest desire for truth, beauty and justice is only adequately answered by an opening of what Giussani calls ‘the religious sense’ by which they become aware of new depths in their own being.¹⁴

But how are we to ‘propose’ the gospel today?

We are all under the same mental calamity; we have all forgotten our names. We have all forgotten what we really are. All that we call common sense and rationality and practicality and positivism only means that for certain dead levels of our

life we forget that we have forgotten. All that we call spirit and art and ecstasy only means that for one awful instant we remember that we forget.¹⁵

These are the passionate words of G. K. Chesterton, sounding quite like Baudelaire for whom even a sense of damnation was preferable to the dull, limbo forgetfulness of modern life. People nowadays in our secular age are what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls ‘buffered’.¹⁶ They believe themselves to be autonomous agents, who live in a rational universe. They are no longer ‘porous’ as in pre-modern societies where people felt themselves traversed by forces beyond the self. Instead they live – or believe they live – in the fortified citadel of individualist subjectivity. The reality is that they are no such thing: capitalism and consumerism tell them their desires and manipulate them; bureaucracy and the social environment affect their every move. But that is their assumption about the world and how it works. They are always connected: Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones – but this is bodiless connection: another buffer between them and the material world, or the inter-personal.

The way in which new initiatives in evangelism have often sought to address this buffered self is to enter the game. It is all part of the message-in-the-bottle evangelism. The message is the same but the bottle changes. We mimic secular society as our ‘bottle’. Nowadays we routinely employ the managerial tool of PowerPoint in church services and encourage tweeted responses to the sermon; even online church membership is a possibility. Of course all media that aid communication have a role to play in setting up meetings of real people; making the housebound feel connected. Senior clergy may tweet to good purpose and social media may aid political campaigning. There is an important role for new media in communicating the gospel through images, blogs, YouTube videos and chat-rooms. Alone, however, this is not sufficient for the Christian life and especially not for worship and the embodied inter-communion of the life of the Church. Many people can become slaves to their telephones. They are never in the moment, always distracted. Bunyan would have called the narcissism encouraged by social media practices ‘Vanity Fair’. Should we ditch two millennia of silence shaped by beauty in our liturgy for that? Yet it

is the outcome of a separation of medium and message, which denies us the criteria with which to praise or critique these social practices. For it is our own common form of life which judges and assesses.

St Paul's evangelistic strategy is often held up as being the justification for wholesale embrace of cultural productions, but I would like to suggest that it actually offers an alternative approach. In Athens, as described in Acts 17, Paul uses quotations from Greek poetry and philosophy to engage discussion of the unknown God to whom an altar is dedicated. To begin with the poetry concerned is already several hundred years old. This is hardly a reference to popular culture but to contemporary philosophy. It is taken from a Stoic poem, *Phaenomena*, about astronomy, written about the beginning of the third century before Christ, which itself critiques idol-worship in so far as it espouses the Stoic concept of a Divine Reason in which humanity shares: 'for we indeed are his offspring' (Acts 17:29).¹⁷ There are, however, two important points we can take from it: first, Paul does address and question the culture of those to whom he speaks but without at all abandoning his own tradition. Indeed, he stresses God as Creator and Judge, which is quite different from the pantheism of Stoicism. Secondly, Paul addresses the Greeks' deepest longings as detected both by their religious practices, now coming under philosophical critique, and by that same philosophical quest. To propose the gospel, we too need to engage in culture, and may indeed refer to anything from contemporary pop music to *EastEnders*. But we do not use that culture as clothes with which to dress our 'message', for we come 'encultured'. Rather, we engage with culture and evaluate it in so far as it has something to offer, or debate it in such a way as allows us to propose the gospel. So for example, I gave a talk recently to a secular group about detective stories. I opened debate about why television detective programmes have become so much focused around the corpse and the work of the pathologist, as in the series *Silent Witness*. They were intrigued because this emphasis is so obviously the case and yet is never discussed. I then suggested that without any reference to a soul or a religious frame to experience, the body is all we have to look to for meaning. Pathologists combine a doctor, scientist, detective and even priest as they probe and touch the dead body. What does it mean to call the body a 'silent witness'?

Witness to what? Why is pseudo-religious music played as its signature tune? Making people think about cultural meaning distances them from their own assumptions, and begins to evoke what Giussani calls ‘the religious sense’ of something more, something beyond. Lastly, I introduced the question: ‘Aren’t we actually seeking something more from the material in such programmes?’ So evangelism in this way might mean screening films, discussing and sharing in contemporary cultural events, but always so as to examine, to probe, to suggest. Each cultural production is an opening – a communication – by which we can enter and detect a desire for truth, beauty or goodness within it. Lady Gaga’s music and even sexually explicit videos might equally be a place to start in terms of detecting the desire for the transcendent, but not without critique, and certainly not by including such music in worship.

In so doing, we begin to move towards the second model of evangelism, which I have called ‘the blue flower’ from an idea in an unfinished novel by that German Romantic writer who called himself ‘Novalis’, meaning digger of new ground. Henry von Ofterdingen, the eponymous hero of his novel, dreams that he swims out of a cave and into a clear blue fountain with dark blue cliffs in the distance:

But what attracted him with great force was a tall, pale blue flower, which stood beside the spring and touched him with its broad glistening leaves. Around this flower were countless others of every hue, and the most delicious fragrance filled the air. [But] he saw nothing but the blue flower and gazed long upon it with inexpressible tenderness. Finally, when he wanted to approach this flower, it all at once began to move and change; the leaves became more glistening [...] the flower leaned towards him and its petals displayed an expanded blue corolla wherein a delicate face hovered.¹⁸

At this point his mother awakens him, but ever after the flower becomes the emblem of his longing: ‘I feel that it reaches into my soul as into a giant wheel, impelling it onward with a mighty swing’.¹⁹ In the language of Giussani, this is the opening of the self to the religious sense, in which it begins to see its relation to the infinite: the ‘our heart

is restless until it rests in You' of Augustine's *Confessions*.²⁰ The blue flower is an opening to mystery, to desire, to the infinite. Anything in the world can offer this experience, which has a threefold dimension. First, it discerns beauty beyond the self which calls out the deepest feelings; secondly, the object becomes a subject and relational in some way; thirdly, the whole experience opens up a trajectory calling the self beyond itself into the mystery of existence itself.

This does not mean that such an aesthetic approach need preclude critique, for we have made it difficult through our manufacturing practices, economics and commodification for all objects to be easily opened in this way. Sometimes judgement comes before that opening to relation can take place. And the blue flower is itself a critique of pagan approaches to nature, which divinize it. Nature is our sister, not our mother, Chesterton wrote, by which he means we have to see ourselves in relation as to an equal other, rather than to an origin: 'we have to admire, but not to imitate'.²¹ If nature is the end point of worship, we end up worshipping cruelty. Christianity, especially in Celtic lands like Scotland, can learn much from the new paganism about recapturing that lost closeness and kinship. The blue flower of Novalis may have been a gentian but the Scottish bluebell is as much an opening to the divine. Yet fragile bluebell or tough gentian, each says in the words of Psalm 100:3, 'we did not make ourselves'. To see the quality, beauty and reality of a flower is to already connect it beyond the purely material.

To open the buffered self to beauty, goodness and truth, it is often necessary first to stage and suggest these moments of estrangement and transcendence – wardrobe door openings to use the example of C. S. Lewis. A man once described to me his conversion from twenty years of militant atheism, which began when a brother from a monastic community asked him, 'Do you have an inner life?' and he realised for the first time that he did. People may call themselves spiritual but they still do not necessarily realise that they have a soul. Again we can use culture: film, art, literature, to prepare people for the gospel. The piercingly bitter-sweet ending of *Lord of the Rings*; the mysterious depths of Chardin's shadowy nativity; the ridiculous absurdity of the death of the father in the film, *Life is Beautiful*; a walk into a wood; a ballad. I write as someone who exercises ministry in a cathedral,

and it is impossible to underestimate the power of such a building to draw out such desires. St Giles' in Edinburgh, for example, draws people from the busy streets around it at all hours, and has a strong sense of the numinous. Indeed, a recent report, *Spiritual Capital*, gives statistical evidence of the work such buildings perform, as does the great increase of numbers at services in English cathedrals.²² Southwell Minster is an obscure little town in Sherwood Forest with relatively few visitors compared with somewhere like St Giles, yet when 500 leaflets about the Trinity, a Christian view of death, and so on were left in our candle chapel, they disappeared in a week. We cannot all have a glorious building but we can all shape our space to make it prayerful, still and meaningful. And we can all find a way that is integral to our common life to awaken longing through cultural practice.

The blue flower in the story was an actual plant, and yet it suggested something beyond itself. Blue is not for nothing the colour of hope and of the heavens. It was both object and sign: material and yet enchanted. For me, evangelism is a baptism of the imagination.²³ In deciding how best to present this, the Church will need to look deeply into our society, not to ape its values but to find that unknown god, the point where desire and longing are manifest. Stillness, joy, blessing and forgiveness; a life in relation – this is what Christ offers in his Church. And how greatly our society needs these virtues! But we have all forgotten our names, so that evoking the religious sense may have to involve a certain degree of defamiliarization as the critics call it, or 'making strange'. Churches are distant and strange places to significant numbers of people today but this is now an advantage and not a barrier to evangelism. Why not open your city-centre church late on a Saturday night when carousers often need a quiet place to be? Light it with candles and have some occasional prayer or reading, or just peace. I once experienced a church in Italy that was kept open and alight daily until midnight, and the experience was very powerful. We need to stop seeing buildings as barriers to mission and begin to think how they can resource it. Start a film society but don't just show blockbusters: take *Cave of Dreams* or *Life is Beautiful* or even *Bambi* and talk about its powerful moments. No, this is not a church; it is not worship; but yes, this is an outworking of the church, to draw people further in and further on, to evoke the blue flower.

For children, the wonder of life and its seriousness is often first found in the Harry Potter stories; they bond children together like nothing else. J. K. Rowling is a Christian and her finale to the series, when Harry accepts death and isolation, and even disillusion, is wholly Christian. In the end he renounces even magic as power itself. Offer a holiday club based on the stories but not just as fun: explore their religious and moral subtext, so as to reveal the power of the imagination. We make children's Bibles comic and trite. We should be publishing artwork of the highest quality, full of darkness as well as humour, full of beauty, to stage the blue flower moment of awakened desire for the infinite.

I claimed earlier that we Christians are ourselves the gospel in our experience of forgiveness and new life. That new life should itself have a creative and imaginative dimension. Not all of us want to paint pictures but very many take photographs, garden or strip engines. 'We make still by the law in which we're made' Tolkien said in a poem that completed the conversion of C. S. Lewis.²⁴ We are both signs and sign-makers. To give meaning to engine-stripping is to begin to connect with religious value. The Fresh Expressions movement, which works often through networks would then wish to make a church out of engine-strippers, believing that the gospel is an abstract message which can be 'clothed' anew; blue flower evangelism would use the activity as the point of entry for the evoking of the religious sense. There is a difference. The Fresh Expressions approach is to see a mission opportunity; the blue flower way is to value it for its own sake: its beauty, goodness and usefulness – but that is already to connect it to meaning beyond itself, and to render it a sign. And it does not mean that there cannot be a way to value and make use of such skills in ecclesial life.

Travelling around Scotland today makes one increasingly aware of a renewed local pride in history, local produce and skills, and in the landscape. The debates about independence have provoked real attempts at self-understanding. It is a chance too for the Scottish churches to examine their own history and traditions, reaching right back to Pictish times, and the practices that sustained such faith in dark periods. How can Scottish evangelism today reconnect with the

heroism of the Covenanters but also the creative faith of the stone-carvers?

So far very little mention has been made about Christ himself. But Christ is the way, the truth, the life. No one comes to the Father but by Him. Christ is as much a way of looking at the world as an object, as St Augustine understood:

But distinct from [the objects of the intellect] is the Light by which the soul is illumined, in order that it may see and truly understand everything, either in itself or in the light. For the Light is God himself, whereas the soul is a creature; yet, since it is rational and intellectual, it is made in His image. And when it tries to behold the Light, it trembles in its weakness and finds itself unable to do so. Yet from this source comes all the understanding it is able to attain.²⁵

Christ is the wisdom – the light – by which we understand anything, as well as our principle of interpretation. We tremble as we seek to make sense of Him, as Henry trembled before the flower. Christ is, of course, the ultimate blue flower, and all things and people in the world draw their meaning from him, and lead back to him once understood. I asked that same man who was questioned by the monk what drew him to Christ at that religious house, where he was asked about his inner life. ‘It was their worship’, he replied. The community prayed seriously and with attention and he was drawn to the one to whom and through whom they offered the prayer. Christ is now as distant as any star to most people. It will mean little to invite them to him directly. Let them first realise the depth of their need and longing, and gradually they can be drawn into an encounter with the only person, fully human like themselves and yet fully divine, to answer to that void of wanting; to give them their true name. They can only learn that from the community that reads the scriptures together, breaks bread and makes peace and is Christ’s body on earth. We offer them not a message but a person and a way of life that opens onto mystery. But humanity is consoled and sustained by such paradox.

Notes

- ¹ *Novalis: Philosophical Writings* (trans. and ed. Margaret Mahony Stoljar; New York: SUNY Press, 1997), 81, fragment 54.
- ² BBC News Channel, “Kirk seeks to connect with online congregations”, 4 May 2010 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/8659276.stm> (accessed 30 April 2013).
- ³ *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), 97. See Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), especially Chapter 1, for a fuller critique of this method.
- ⁴ *Mission-Shaped Church*, 126.
- ⁵ In the New Revised Standard translation, there are four uses in the Old Testament, two in Maccabees, and only one in the New Testament, in Acts 12:25. It is often added, however, as an editorial heading, e.g. ‘The Mission of the Twelve’.
- ⁶ Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission* (trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf; Saint Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1965) develops this idea, which originated at the Conference of the International Missionary Council at Willingen in 1952. See also John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, missio Dei, Karl Barth and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010).
- ⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (trans. Margaret Kohl; London: SCM Press, 1977), 64.
- ⁸ See Allen Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: Concepts and Images of Authority in Paganism and Early Christianity Before the Age of Cyprian* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999), Chapter 1.
- ⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986 [1908]), 157, 161.

- ¹⁰ Long attributed to Teresa of Ávila, it cannot be found in her own works, see *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 7th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 684.
- ¹¹ Available at <http://research.yougov.co.uk/documents/8507/>, with discussion at <http://faithdebates.org.uk/category/debates/2013-debates/> (accessed 5 November 2013). See also the article by Linda Woodhead, “‘Nominals’ are the Church’s Hidden Strength”, *Church Times*, 26 April, 2013, 16.
- ¹² See the interview with Giovanni Testori at <http://newyorkencounter.org/literature-corner/giussani-and-testori-conversation.html> (accessed 5 November 2013).
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (trans. John Zucchi; Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997).
- ¹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, “The Ethics of Elfland” in *Orthodoxy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1957 [1908]), 81.
- ¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37–42.
- ¹⁷ It has been argued that Paul is quoting a Jewish source, Aristobulus, from the second century BC, who quotes the opening of the poem; see M. J. Edwards, “Quoting Aratus”, *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 83 (1992): 266–69.
- ¹⁸ Novalis, *Henry von Ofterdingen* (trans. Palmer Hilty; Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1964), 17.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 19.
- ²⁰ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4.
- ²¹ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 188f.
- ²² See Theos and The Grubb Institute, *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals* (2012) [http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/Reports/Spiritual Capital 64pp - FINAL.pdf](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/files/files/Reports/Spiritual%20Capital%2064pp%20FINAL.pdf).
- ²³ C. S. Lewis uses the phrase ‘baptized my imagination’ to describe the effect of his discovery of the religious fantasy novel *Phantastes* by George MacDonald, who, appropriately, was highly influenced by Novalis. See *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966 [1955]), 181.

- ²⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Mythopoeia' in *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 81.
- ²⁵ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (trans. J. H. Taylor; Ancient Christian Writers 42; New York: Newman Press, 1982), XII. 31, p. 222.