

Tallinn lecture

Living Theologically: what blessing does the Church of Christ bring?

1.

What is it to be blessed? The Beatitudes delivered by Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke list what kinds of people might be described as ‘blessed’ or ‘fortunate’: and they are people – we could say - who are not the prisoners of their own stories. Those who are not anxious about stockpiling their resources but acknowledge their dependence on mercy and gift; those who are hungry not for more security for themselves, but for a justice that is shared with all; those who are compassionate and without aggression, who are not afraid to be wounded, who labour for reconciliation – all these are people who have left behind the passion to be the possessors and managers of their destiny, people who know that it is only in relation to God, and to their brothers and sisters under God, that they will be fully human. Instead of an obsessive longing to define their world and secure their control, they listen for the call of God and look for the gift of God in the needs of the world, and they find the courage to embrace the risks that this looking and listening can bring. Whatever the visible pressures and costs, they are ‘favoured’, in the sense of being where it is best for them.

Most of us are, to a greater or lesser extent, prisoners of our own stories, and so are *not* where it is best for us. The difficulty is not about the obvious fact that we are who we are because of what we inherit; we need to know this, to reflect on who we have been – which includes the honest naming of our failures and of hurts done to us, as well as the celebration of the riches we have received. That is not imprisonment, and it is another kind of delusion that we can ignore all this. No, the problem arises when this inheritance is seen as what gives us value and power and, above all, *righteousness* in the present moment, the sense of our virtue and our entitlement to reward and success. It is not only that we are who we are because of our past. but that we are necessarily *meritorious and virtuous* because of that past; and so we cannot move on to any new and challenging relations because we are afraid of losing that sense of value and virtue.

It is an issue that greatly complicates current debates about the post-colonial legacy in our world. Former imperial powers resist the full acknowledgment of the immense and lasting damage inflicted by their colonial adventures; former colonies are vulnerable to a political rhetoric that deflects attention from contemporary internal stresses and injustices by a constant reversion to their history of oppression. And even within Europe, the same dynamic is evident, as the history of violent conflict and aggression is denied or justified on the one hand, and weaponised on the other. One of the most striking aspects of the current appalling situation in Ukraine is the way in which it has revived a long-standing Russian tradition of identifying itself as the victim of consistent historical aggression from elsewhere, so that its own aggressions can be presented as necessary protective strategies. Yet it is not as though Russia has a monopoly on this kind of moral mythology. Most national narratives have elements of the same attempt to secure their sense of worth by histories of both triumph and suffering.

In this light, it is very noticeable that Hebrew Scripture offers a significantly different paradigm. When Moses addresses the Israelites in the early chapters of Deuteronomy, the constant refrain is that the people must never forget that they are a community simply because of the call of God (Dt. 4.32-35, 6.10-12, 7.7-8), and that their success or security is not the guaranteed result of their own resources (Dt.8.11-18). The narrative of the chosen people is one in which what provides stability is faithfulness to a vision in which the loving gift of God is the foundation of a community's worth; and this entails an uncompromising resistance to idolatry, to the identification of God with anything that is less than God – including the identification of God with the community's wealth or comfort. This is why the narrative of Hebrew Scripture is repeatedly a story of failure and dispossession, and of the summons to return to a faithfulness expressed in justice and true worship.

This is the background to the Beatitudes: we have to learn that our worth does not have to be created by our effort, and that our identity does not consist in what we can make and preserve for ourselves or in the conviction of our innocence and goodness. The story that we now tell is of another kind of shared identity, in which a community finds its solidity in the knowledge that each one is faithfully present for the sake of all others; where mutual assurance of attention and acceptance creates the foundation for trust. And the cornerstone of this is simply the recognition that this community exists in a state of 'blessing', alignment with the act of God, whose love is not apportioned as a reward. To be part of such a community is to be released from our stories; not that they are simply cancelled, but they are seen afresh in the context of the story of God with God's people, a story of gratuitous invitation, welcome and fidelity. The central identifying action of the community is the giving of thanks for this invitation, and the re-enactment of the invitation in the corporate drama of worship. In the context of Hebrew Scripture, this is most plainly visible in the Passover celebration; but it is also implicit in the liturgy of offering the first fruits in Dt. 26, where the person presenting the offering declares, 'A wandering [or 'lost', or 'defenceless'] Aramaean was my father.' The person praying here and now rehearses the story of God's free adoption of the ancestors so as to make them a community whose exemplary faithfulness to one another and to God is able to transform the vision of human life together. And in the context of Christian worship, the narrative is that of Jesus' declaration at the Last Supper that his presence with the community of his friends is assured by the identification of the bread and wine of the common meal with his embodied action of self-offering, in life and death.

2.

These bits of liturgical story-telling and dramatic identification are the beginnings of theology. One way of defining theology is to say that it is the practice of reflecting on the difference made by the act of God to our usual ways of looking at the world and ourselves. If the act of God sets us in a new 'landscape', theology attempts to map that landscape, working towards a language about God and creation more consistent with what is now freshly seen or intuited in the light of what has been recognised as God's action. A new community has come to exist, defining itself by new standards or protocols of mutual commitment and equal justice. It explains itself in an origin story about displacement, slavery and liberation – the narratives of Abraham, Jacob, Moses. It presents a new 'grammar' for speaking about God as the one who is made known in the creation of such a community – a God who promises faithfulness, unchanging and impartial judgment, and inexhaustible mercy, who is characterised above all as the one who commits

without reserve to this community and is content to be named as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is the basic theological moment, when God is *named* newly and distinctively.

And so, analogously, in Christian Scripture: a new community has come to exist, defining itself as united by the exchange of gifts and life in the human diversity of its composition, explaining itself in the origin story of the group gathered around Jesus of Nazareth. This is not so much a story about slavery and liberation, though it clearly makes use of the Passover-and-Exodus pattern as a model in many ways; it is a story about the self-defences and self-deceits of power, religious and political, and about the infidelity and unreliability of human agents called to display solidarity with the fidelity of God; and then also about the undefeated consistency of divine action, embodied in the literal renewal of the embodiment of this action in the flesh and blood of Jesus raised from the death inflicted by human both human power and human weakness or cowardice. The community has been re-created by the risen Christ, whose own power (his abiding 'spirit' or breath of life) is manifest in the forgiveness of sins (Jn .20.22) and the liberty to call God 'Abba' (Rom.8.15, Gal.4.6). God is therefore now to be named as the God of Jesus and the Spirit at work in the interdependent community, where each collaborates in transmitting to all the life God gives, which is the life of confident dependence on God, and the liberty to liberate others in God's name.

It is a story told not only from the perspective of the past but from the perspective of the future. The entire narrative is shaped by the conviction that what is partially and incipiently realised in the life of the Christian community reveals what is possible and optimal for the whole created order, in terms of the mutual sustaining and enriching of life (Rom. 8). God's timeless purpose is that finite reality should grow into a stable pattern of mutuality, in which each element becomes 'transparent' to divine action/divine love in regard to others. This is always 'ahead' of us, not a possession that we can consider as a fixed thing at our disposal (the early chapters of II Cor. Are pertinent, and compare also, for example, Eph.1.14 and I Jn 3.). Theology – and the theological action of the liturgy – involves both the telling of a story from the past, a story structured around the consistency of divine gift as it is experienced over time, and the evoking of a perspective from the future that is not as such accessible to human knowledge and must be articulated in the language of petition and imagination.

Petition and imagination: the conviction of the presence of the Spirit of Jesus in the community is what makes sense of both these things. We pray for the coming of God's reign, the fulfilling of God's purpose, and we enact its reality as if it were fully attained. This enactment serves to recall to us both the scope of the promise and the risk of supposing it is already fully realised: we celebrate 'until he comes' (I Cor.11.26). Our sacramental action is theological because it locates us within the history of the impact of divine presence in the human world, refusing to allow us to use our own stories to defend our purity and worth, or to create hierarchies that diminish the dignity and liberty of other communities. Gathered at the Eucharist, the Christian community declares that its history is that of a group existing in its life together as a result of an event of divine calling – both vocation and welcome. It declares that this history is more final and definitive than any other story we tell about ourselves, individually or collectively. It claims that this is the history that will ultimately make fullest sense of human diversity, and it prays that such sense will begin to be made here and now, within and beyond the community. It affirms that the kinds of human life it holds up as signs of new possibility represent – as in the Beatitudes of the Lord – the present reality of future 'blessedness', alignment with the purpose of God, the direction of God's action.

3.

For a Christian community to live ‘theologically’ is a matter of its willingness to live in dialogue with the history that the Eucharist represents. What does this imply for our practical priorities and our engagement with Europe’s political future?

If it is the case that, as political beings, we begin with narratives of defence and vindication, one of the tasks of the Church in public debate is to raise the question of *what stories are being deployed* in such debate. This has been a recurrent theme in responses to discussions about migration, for example: homogenised and simplified national or racial histories are resurrected, and sometimes newer narratives about the threat of global cosmopolitan forces may be in evidence – most dramatically in resurgent anti-semitism, or in the fantasies of ‘replacement theory’ (the idea that there is an active conspiracy to replace ‘European’ – white - populations, in Europe and North America, with other races). There are also narratives, popular in the UK, about a country’s historical hospitality to refugees, deployed by those who want to resist various xenophobic tropes and fears. The former narrative is imprisoning to the degree that it posits a timeless national/racial identity and obscures the sheer historical complexity of the movements of populations. But the latter can be equally ambiguous, in that it may be another way of appealing to a golden age of historic virtue that needs to be recovered; the record of Great Britain in the reception of refugees is as chequered as that of most nations, and the proud rehearsal of Britain’s role in the *Kindertransport* of the 1930’s is by no means beyond challenge in its details. Both narratives may get in the way of an attentive response here and now to the facts of migrancy, a response that thinks seriously about the actual needs both of migrants and of the societies from which they come, about the root causes of migrancy in environmental pressures, or in civil wars aggravated by the interests of other countries, extractive industries and geopolitical rivalries.

Against such narratives, the Church proposes the story that sustains its own identity. This story is indeed one that cannot sit alongside any kind of racial mythology or any inflexibility about borders. But it is not simply a story about the imperative to be kind to the stranger; it is a story that mandates the question of how we come to think about the ‘stranger’ not as a passive recipient of the gifts that come from our privilege but as a source of life to us, a partner in relation. It is a story that obliges us to think about our complicity, past and present, in the suffering or privation of the other, and allows us to do this without fear because we recognise that this complicity in sin is overtaken and overcome by divine faithfulness. We do not have to prove our righteousness in order to have a claim on God’s gift, and so need not panic in the face of losing the stories that vindicate us against our enemies. The good news is that we are free to tell another story, one that does not turn on the need for us to be in the right and in control. It is a story about the possibility of ‘blessedness’, in the sense of living in the flow, in the direction, of God’s act by turning from the closed framework of self-vindication to the vision of a future in which our ‘righteousness’ will be bound up with our nourishment of one another, our place in the exchange of fulfilled and liberated relatedness that is the destiny of creation in response to the creator.

But when we speak of ‘the destiny of creation’, we are bound to be conscious of what is undoubtedly the most urgent element in any thinking about blessings – and curses – for the future, whether in Europe or anywhere else on the planet. The environmental crisis overshadows every other issue, simply because it determines the material conditions within

which any future social and political developments will take place. It provides yet another kind of narrative that has the potential to make us prisoners. The story here is of an insanely unbalanced account of human entitlement and human capacity that has consistently, in the last three centuries, ignored any sense of the interdependence of human life and the life of the organic order as a whole: the life that matters has been, explicitly or implicitly, defined as human life – and human life lived in a specific mode, that of expanding consumption. As this narrative plays itself out, it proves to include an increasingly chaotic pattern of migration as more regions become unviable for food production or literally uninhabitable because of rising water levels in some areas and desertification in others; and, within a calculable period, the plain fact of rising temperatures will make some currently inhabited places impossibly inhospitable to human life. Internal conflict in states as well as tensions between states are all made more acute in this scenario; it has been plausibly said that the wars of the next generation will be fought over water supplies. And the economic upheaval in some regions that will follow the decline in the production and marketing of fossil fuels adds further complexity to an already very tangled situation.

In other words, the environmental crisis feeds a ‘meta-narrative’ of decline and catastrophe, a secular apocalypse already believed to be probable by many younger citizens in Western societies. In a very important sense, this is a harder narrative to counter than the general stories of acquisition and aggression that we mentioned earlier, because it seems that our choices are so much less obvious – or rather, that the *effect* of any choices made today seems so much less powerful than the legacy of the toxic choices made yesterday (and still being made or assumed to be made). But a narrative in which it is not possible to make transforming decisions is at least as incompatible with Christian language and liturgy as the myths of defence, vindication, and exclusion that feed a hatred of the migrant. If the Church resists this story also, what has it to say about the challenge to hope that the story represents?

And here is the challenge that obliges us to define our terms. In the face of the climate crisis, the one thing no-one (least of all the churches) can or should do is in any way to suggest that an alternative story is one in which we can be sure of being spared this particular ‘time of trial’, this *peirasmós*. From our perspective, there is no story that can avoid the real risk of a ruined world, and so no story that is without the reality of lamentation. Part of what the Church’s witness to ‘blessing’ involves is – paradoxically – the capacity and the courage to name what may be lost, to name and celebrate and grieve for those styles or traditions of human life in which reconciliation with what is around us is built in. In this context that churches have an urgent imperative to acknowledge and speak in solidarity with the lifestyles and life-cycles of indigenous peoples and nomadic communities. In Europe we might think of the Saami or the Roma, and the variety and urgency of the needs of so many others around the world, from the San of Southern Africa to the peoples of the Amazon Basin, are impossible to ignore. But the situation of such groups simply focuses for us the generally dehumanising effect of the pressures of consumption and acquisition, the reduction of all kinds of processes and activities to an imagined exchange value – so that any activity, any relationship, becomes something capable of being priced and purchased, valued in terms other than its agency or energy in itself.

If the Church has anything to say into the narrative of self-consuming consumption, then, it is first a protest against the reduction of what is around us to neutral raw material for human use. We must *pause* to acknowledge the ‘space’ between our desires and the reality that stands outside our minds and plans, and we must remind ourselves that reducing this reality to our

prescriptions is in fact to destroy the separateness and interiority or integrity of what is in front of us, to make a world for ourselves in which we never have to worry about being surprised or puzzled or frustrated. At the very least, the Church proposes the discipline of silencing desire enough to allow the actuality of what is not the self to remain there as a focus of our looking, and a prompt to the scrutiny of what we think we want. Part of our calling is to let the world be what it is and be seen for what it is, by way of an embodied discipline of contemplation, attentive and patient engagement with the material world as an aspect of our growth towards the contemplation of the divine.

But that is not all; and the further step is a hard one. The story of environmental failure and impending disaster is one that is centred upon the powerlessness of the average human agent to determine a safe future for humans. But if we re-cast this *theologically* – as we have been defining this term – the emphasis shifts. Whatever the outcome of the struggle to do justice to this or that solid reality demanding our present attention, the attempt to turn our minds away from their own self-referential concerns is in itself a way of making space in the world for something other than the narrative of all-embracing falsehood, conflict and failure. Or, to put it slightly differently, any act of attention, service, the sharing or nurturing of life, becomes an opening into the fundamental narrative of the universe in the hand of God. As such, it does not have to ‘succeed’ or ‘win’; it must have integrity and clarity, so that the underlying story appears. In appearing, it makes possible some new levels of learning – and so some new levels of hopefulness, not optimistic calculations about the future, but the longer-term confidence that, whether an action is successful or not, it still *tells the truth*, and so tells us that the truth of the creator’s commitment to the creation can still be known and acted upon.

This is supremely what our sacramental action does. It announces the truth about God’s fidelity, God’s promise of unceasing life-giving. It does so – as we have already noted – in the confidence that what it proclaims is the final and optimal state of relation between God and what God has made; but in the nature of the case, it cannot determine when or how that state might be realised. What it does, rather, is to say that we are not prisoners of the present moment – but also that it is in opening ourselves to the present moment that we find ourselves free. We do not have to ‘curate’ the future; our calling is to allow that horizon of divine purpose that is beyond all human history to engage our hearts and bodies in such a way that it becomes clear that transformation is possible because God’s presence and energy do not retreat in the face of betrayal or failure. But to live in this perspective requires a serious and costly renunciation of our longings to determine the future according to our conviction, need, fantasy, or fear. In theological terms, it is about *kenosis*, about the taking-up of the cross. It is, ultimately, allowing God to ‘narrate’, in God’s own terms, by handing over to God both our own aspirations to determine the story and our own despair at not being able to control it.

4.

To live ‘theologically’ is to live under the sign of the cross. It is to let our stories be radically *displaced*, so that the narrative of divine fidelity may appear in the world. The Beatitudes of Jesus are all in their several ways about this displacement, about the imperative to make room here and now for the Kingdom by renouncing sufficiency and complacency, by keeping alive the passionate hunger for the neighbour’s life – including the non-human neighbour’s life; by the simplicity and single-heartedness of a desire for a reconciled world, by willingness to forgive; and by not being surprised if all this brings struggle, suffering and opposition. What we leave

behind is the passion to be in charge of our destiny. We learn to act in love not because we are confident that love will bring us the results we desire, but because love is the appropriate response to the world we are in – just as, if we are singing with others, we try to keep in tune not because we shall be ‘worse off’ if we don’t (we may be unpopular with our fellow singers, but that is not exactly a matter of severe personal cost), but because we acknowledge that this is how we respond so as to fit into what is needed in this moment.

‘Blessing’, then, lies in the discovery of the body and the moment – what the old American hymn memorably describes as ‘the grace to come down where you ought to be’. The Church’s promise is not in solutions or projects, but in practices of attention – which include those practices in which the story of God’s self-presentation and self-giving are declared, the sacramental actions where the scriptural record is rehearsed and we are made contemporary with God’s act in Jesus. But this is not to imply that the Church’s business is to attend to its liturgy as a thing in itself. Liturgy is a process of formation in the freedom to see and hear the narrative in which God seeks to locate us, and so it is something that – as was hinted earlier – sharpens the questions to be asked about the prevailing stories of our culture. It helps us discern what those stories are silencing or obscuring.

Our witness and our gift to the future of our societies is our freedom to invite into the discourse of our societies the things that are routinely, almost automatically denied – including both the dimension of divine purpose and love, which grounds the recognition of the indestructible dignity of all that has been created by that love, and the specific voices that human power systems do not want to hear. In the Europe of today and tomorrow, those voices are those of the displaced, of the increasing number of the financially insecure as the alchemy of global financial regimes works to secure existing structures of money-management, of young people struggling with the mental health challenges that arise from transient rhythms of education, work and relationships – all made more acute by the pandemic – and by the pressure of a merciless, unsleeping online environment in which you have to sustain and prove your worth over and over again, twenty four hours a day; and the voice too of the natural world, a voice whose language is fire and flood. The witness of the Church, when it is living and acting theologically, is seen in our readiness to name and release such voices – not as an unfocused medley of lamenting, but as part of a consistent response to the oppressive and diminishing stories of modernity, in the name of a larger narrative of divine fidelity and ineradicable human dignity and mystery.

There are plenty of forces in contemporary Europe whose currency is a fear that is incompatible with trust in God’s faithfulness and a scepticism about the urgent needs of the rest of the globe that is incompatible with the recognition of universal dignity – a recognition that is essentially a way of affirming the possibility of receiving the gift of God from a variety of strangers. At their worst we see these forces at work in military aggression, hysterical propaganda and indiscriminate slaughter. But the dramatically visible manifestations of the refusal of God’s story are far more widespread, and are manifest in our attitudes to work, to the nurture and formation of children, and to a range of minority concerns (sexual or racial or rooted in differences in ability and health). The liturgical and theological narrative will consistently reinforce our commitment to interrogating the stories that cannot or will not accommodate the radical blessing promised by a faithful God to all those to whom the creator assures commitment. We reflected earlier on ‘petition and imagination’ as the fruits of liturgical action – the act of consciously, collectively and regularly standing within the story of God’s active

presence in creation; and the fruits of petition and imagination become manifest in the attention and the advocacy that the Church brings to the voices that have been silenced and denied.

5.

To characterise the Church's identity in these terms is always to invite a measure of scepticism, even cynicism: the Church has its own story of repeated complicity in violence and silencing of all kinds. But this is where theology becomes more than a set of abstractions. The Church's theological life, so we have been arguing is grounded in the Church's liturgical life. What the Church is, theologically, is a community constantly meeting its judgment. Because its defining activity is not the celebration of its own glorious, triumphant or virtuous past, but the re-presentation of God's confrontation of and endurance through human unfaithfulness, the re-presentation of the event of the betrayal of Jesus by his disciples, it is still able, with whatever degree of awkward penitence, to affirm that its story, sacramentally renewed, survives the egregious failures of those relating it, precisely because it is not a story possessed by the Church as the record of its own past. It is the record of divine persistence and the actuality of a promised future – not a future that can here and now be predicted in its particulars (which would be another form of triumph), but the horizon of an unchanging purpose and an inexhaustible resource. 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (Lk 18.8) But also: 'All will be made alive in Christ' (I Cor.15.22). These are not rival predictions to be harmonised, but a juxtaposition of the utter unreliability of human fidelity and the eternal self-identity of divine gift that we must 'sit with' as patiently as a Buddhist with a *koan*.

The 'blessings' with which we began, those declarations of 'good fortune', being at home in the world God has made, are themselves statements of precarious balance and paradox, suggesting that it is those least at home in a world of secure results and protected advantage who are most at home in the deepest reality of God's world. The blessing we offer, the blessing we ourselves must hear afresh at every celebration of the Lord's Supper, is our testimony to the *fact* of the Kingdom, surviving every betrayal because it is the fact of God's presence shaping the world of finite interaction, and no turn of affairs can destroy it. 'Being theological' is setting out the form and ground of this fact in our midst; which ultimately is simply 'Christ yesterday, today and forever,' Christ who declares himself ours – so that we are delivered from the unbearable burden of being gods and creators for our own hungry and damaged selves.
