

Talk Three – March 27th 2019

I'm going to break our convention a little bit this evening by *not* opening with a passage from Mark's gospel. Instead, this is from Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*. Bessy, who's speaking in this scene, is a young woman dying from a lung condition caused by the polluted air in the cotton mill where she's worked all her short life. She's asking her friend Margaret to read to her from the Bible.

Read me – not a sermon chapter, but a story chapter; they've pictures in them, which I see when my eyes are shut.¹

And so, to Mark:

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:30-34)

Like Bessy listening, let's picture the scene: the excited apostles, a little proud of all they've done and taught, gathering around Jesus, eager for their teacher's approval. Jesus recognising how tired they are, how they need space – a gap. We can imagine the relief as the boat pulls away from the shore. The breeze, the quiet, a moment of peace. Only to find the crowd has followed them to the place where they're to put in. The boat that was to deliver them into a time of rest, delivers them back into the midst of ministry. Crowds press in – with their hopes and fears, demands and needs. We can pick out lepers, paralytics, widows, orphans. Standing on the bustling, noisy lakeshore, Jesus looks out over the sea of pleading,

¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*. (London: Penguin, 1995), 199

desperate faces. In the din and the dust, he glances questioningly across at his disciples, meets their eyes. He gets from each – a nod. Then he turns to face the crowd. Expectant, the crowd falls silent.

There's nothing in the description I just gave of the gospel passage that a camera couldn't see. Actually, there's very little in Mark's gospel that the camera couldn't see and film. Mark's gospel is an admirable screenplay. As Bessy would say – it's got pictures in it. This is how screenplays are written.

Writing screenplays – which I've done for many years, and being a priest, which I've done for a few, look like wildly disparate, unrelated roles. Surely this is one of those gaps we've been thinking about? But actually, I don't feel I could get a cigarette paper between my writing screenplays and my ministry. Let me explain why by telling a story. The Jewish American poet and scholar, John Hollander (d. 2013) tells this story about a child brought up to know the whole psalter by heart. But the child mis-learned a verse of Psalm twenty tree. Instead of:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life

he thought the verse went:

Surely good Mrs Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life.²

Now, as a screenwriter (and as a priest actually), I think the child was right. Goodness and mercy are grand, abstract principles. Big words. Big ideas. They're real concepts. But I can't act them, or ask an actor to act them. I can't write in a screenplay with the instruction for the actor: 'this person is good and merciful'; I need to *show* the audience – through this person's actions – that they are good and merciful.

Now, I know who good Mrs Murphy is, and I'm sure you do too. We've all known Mrs Murphys. And they're following us all through our lives.

² For this story see Jasper, David, *The Language of Liturgy: A Ritual Poetics* (London: SCM, 2018), 27

Screenwriters are always taught – *show, don't tell*. The screen drama should unfold through the actions of the characters, *not* through exposition.

Talking about goodness and mercy *tells* us something about God. But good Mrs Murphy – she somehow *shows* us, reveals something rather than explains something to us.

I think, as Christians, we're readier to adopt, and accept the *personal* before the *abstract*, the story before the sermon, the intimate telling detail or gesture before the philosophical big idea. It's in our DNA. For Christians, God lived and lives with us – as a human person: a God “that we could hear, see with our eyes, look at, and touch with our hands” (1 John 1:1).

Let's return to our 'story chapter' by the shore of the lake. I asked you to picture the scene. 'Scene' is a Greek word. It comes from *skene* which means tent or structure and it was the name given to the back of the stage, the scenery.

It would be behind the scenes that an actor playing a god would be prepared to be hoisted into the action on stage via a sort of crane that lifted the god from behind the *skene* and into the midst of the play. This the *deus ex machina* who comes to sort out the tragic or comic mess made by the characters on stage.

So, to picture the scene on the shore of the lake, as we were doing, is already – subtly perhaps – to see the boat on which Jesus arrives at the shore, as the crowds saw its approach, is to see it as a machine for delivering God to them. Jesus as a god delivered into the action via a *machina*. He is from outside, from above, from behind the scenes. We think in terms of scenery and staging and action. But Jesus isn't a *deus ex machina* of that sort. He's already and always in the middle of things, amongst us.

What these people have it seems to me, and what Jesus recognises them as having: are expectations. There is a gap between the lives they are leading, and the lives they want to lead. They look to a leader to guide them to richer pastures, a safer fold.

They have expectations of this leader. A leader will deserve followers, will earn them, will justify their position as leader. He or she will merit the role assigned to them. After all – sheep without a shepherd is a tragic sight, but a shepherd without sheep is a comic one. A shepherd without sheep isn't a shepherd; a leader without followers isn't a leader.

In our day, we're vexed by and anxious about this gap between sheep and shepherd, between leaders and followers. We like to think we've given up the idea of gods or leaders or a shepherd being delivered from on high. We're famously not even sure about experts any more: "I think this country has had enough of experts." Be careful what you wish for, Michael Gove. And 'elite' is a pejorative term. We don't need a shepherd. Yet we can't help still looking for them, scanning the skies, scanning the shoreline for a boat.

Instead, we like to suppose our leaders have earned their positions of responsibility and authority, that they deserve their power and remuneration packages. And yet we are probably all fairly appalled when we see the CEO of Shell's annual salary is 148 times that of the average worker in the company he's been appointed to lead and to serve. This isn't a shepherd, we feel; this is a shark.

The point is, we no longer look for a gap – a masking *skene* – that divides sheep from shepherd. We can look after ourselves, thanks very much. We have science, not scenery behind which a god waits.

But actually, Jesus is no *deus ex machina*. That boat in the gospel passage just crosses the lake, it doesn't transcend some metaphysical boundary, some celestial scenery.

But nor does Jesus deny the gap between sheep and shepherd. Instead he radically alters our understanding of the gap. He reverses our *expectations*, our expectations of what the gap means.

While the people waiting on the shore, and even the disciples feel this leader will be the one to deliver them; this leader will fulfil the promises of scripture. In all the coming and

going and hurrying, the people are all too ready to recognise the gap, all too hopeful of this God's dramatic delivery from backstage. A redeemer, a *redemptor* – literally a buyer-back, someone with the purchasing power to free us from bondage. They're expecting goodness and mercy; they are not expecting good Mrs Murphy, who may have no purchasing power, or any worldly power at all.

They think they know what a leader should look like, what a leader should *do*.

Researchers at Cambridge University recently published findings that showed – sheep are able to recognise human faces. In laboratory tests, sheep could tell the difference between Fiona Bruce, Emma Watson and Barack Obama. The presumption being, I suppose, – that the ability to spot celebrities and politicians is a sign of intelligence, that it confers some vital evolutionary advantage, perhaps. Hmm.

Anyway, sheep are cleverer than we thought. Now, we live surrounded by sheep, and I admit, I certainly can't tell one from another. Perhaps a shepherd comes to know individuals in their flock. Comes to care for them, as Jesus cares for the people on the shore of the lake.

Of course, the sheep seeking a shepherd analogy is not peculiar to Mark, and not even peculiar to the New Testament. In Ezekiel God says

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I

will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. (Ezekiel 34:15-24)

Here the shepherd is a judge, a power, an authority set over the people. This is the sort of shepherd the people hurrying to the lakeshore are expecting, a new David, a prince, and a righteous judge, a liberator. There will open a yawning gap between what they expect, and the shepherd that comes.

We are confronting perhaps the most problematic and baffling gap of all this evening: the gap between what we expect, and what actually happens. This gap looks for all the world like a shortfall. More than the wilderness, more than fasting – more than forty days – this is *the* Lenten gap – the gap between our worldly hopes and dreams, and our disappointments.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1)

A friend of mine, my partner in writing screenplays tells a story of his time at school. His mother was a teacher and his father an artist. Both were passionate francophiles. And from an early age, Lyall was packed off on the channel train from Waterloo to catch the ferry alone and to make the rail connection at Calais to Paris. A boy aged six, travelling alone in Europe – it seems unimaginable now. Anyway, he grew up speaking good – fairly fluent French. So, when it came to his own schooling, he expected to win the French reading prize. It was just a given, his for the taking. When the prize went to someone else, he was incredulous and indignant. An injustice! He still remembers the shock. Whenever now an expected positive outcome fails to materialise, he simply says: “French reading prize.”

Slightly odd to think of the disciples on Good Friday walking away from the harrowing end of all their dreams, the loss of their shepherd, saying “French reading prize.” But that’s effectively what they’re experiencing – the dreadful gap between what they’d expected from this shepherd, and the reality.

But I actually think there's more in these sheep and shepherd passages from Ezekiel and Mark than judgement. More than judgement, both passages are about *recognition*, about seeing. Jesus recognises his flock with compassion, and the sheep recognise their shepherd; we now have scientific evidence to back this up. And in the Ezekiel passage we find a shepherd who can seek out their flock. A shepherd who is able to "Judge between sheep and sheep," to recognise "The sheep that trample the pasture and muddy the drinking water in the brooks, ruining it for others." This shepherd can spot the strong and fat sheep that use their strength to bully the weaker, the leaner, those less able to defend themselves.

Then the shepherd sits in judgement on those sheep. This shepherd is a righteous prince and judge. Like those people gathered on the shore in a violently occupied country, we need this shepherd. We too, at a time of social and political turmoil, look for this shepherd. We feel sure we'll recognise this shepherd when he comes. Hosanna!

Then Jesus comes and upsets everything, as usual. Upsets Ezekiel's message beautifully, radically, disrupting our neat analogies and models, challenging us by twisting the sheep and shepherd metaphor around. In his gospel, Mark has Jesus tell us that:

Many who are first will be last, and the last first. (Mark 10:31)

And:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:41-45)

We categorially have *not* recognised our shepherd if we're still looking for our *deus ex machina* who comes to put everything right in Act Five. We have failed the Cambridge researchers' test. We couldn't distinguish our Lord, our Christ, our shepherd, from Fiona Bruce or Barack Obama – or the boy on the checkout at the Co-op, or the elderly lady waiting

on the railway platform. We don't recognise him in the hungry young man at the foodbank struggling to feed his family, in the stranger, the refugee. We don't recognise him in the disruptive child with learning difficulties, or the serial offender – inside again. Or the teenage mother who has made mistakes, who has been denied citizenship in her country of birth, and now begs for mercy.

That's not him, surely? Not the shepherd?

Our shepherd, our prince is not recognised on a throne, behind bullet proof glass, in private jets, or palaces. We're all too ready to recognise *them*.

No, our shepherd is right here, not delivered by tricks from backstage, but already here, always here. Our neighbour. The opposite of our neighbour. This shepherd moves among us, follows us all the days of our life.

The sheep in the Cambridge study were able to recognise celebrities, were able to recognise their shepherds. Marvellous. But surely we're missing the obvious – they recognise each other.

Story chapters, not sermon chapters. Show, don't tell. The screenwriting maxim – is about recognition. About how we recognise one another, not in the use of abstract words like goodness and mercy, but in our actions, however small. Let me give you an example of what I mean, not from a screenplay but a novel that has very recently been adapted for the screen. This is a short passage from James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Tish, the heroine of the novel describes how her parents met at the bus station in Albany – both fleeing bad jobs and bad relationships. Both young, and lost, and vulnerable in the big American night.

He saw her walk away from the ticket window and sit down by herself on a bench and look around her. She was trying to look tough and careless, but she just looked scared. He says he wanted to laugh, and, at the same time, something her frightened eyes made him want to cry.³

³ James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. (London: Michael Joseph, 1974), 40

It is a passage about recognising the other, about seeing what we owe the other: our broken hearts.

We *will* be judged – as Ezekiel says – but not by worldly success, not by how dutiful we've been as worshipping Christians, not even by *faith* – but by how much we have recognised and loved one another.

This is the real *deus ex machina* – it is not delivering a god from behind the scenery into the action. It is a loving God in the midst of the action from the start *and to the end*. God in our midst.

Emmanuel Lévinas, the French philosopher we met last week, said the only thing that really converts people, the ultimate moral imperative, is “the face of the other.”

Levinas, as I said, had a huge influence on twentieth century philosophy. But he's also had an impact on film makers and dramatists. Because crucial to his thinking is *the* dramatic principle: recognition. Recognition that offers redemption.

Belgian film makers, the Dardennes brothers cite Levinas as a key influence. It's most apparent in their 1999 film *Rosetta*.

Rosetta is a film about a girl in dire personal and financial circumstances, searching for a job to keep herself and her mother alive. She lives with her hopelessly alcoholic mother in a caravan park on the outskirts of a northern European town. She finally manages to get a job working in a waffle van making waffles. She falls out with the young man who first got her the job – and she tells her boss that this young man has set up his own waffle business, stealing the batter from the boss's van. The young man is sacked and angrily pursues Rosetta.

At the end of the film, Rosetta – in utter despair – returns to the caravan, boils herself an egg, then goes around the caravan, carefully sealing all the gaps around the windows and the door. Then she goes to the little stove and turns on the gas. And lies down, and waits to die. But hissing of the gas canister fades to silence; the canister is empty. Determined to end

her life, she goes to replace the canister. And she struggles back to the caravan with the full canister, carrying the instrument of her death. The camera never leaves her. There is no sermon, only the story.

As she struggles back to the caravan with the heavy cannister, the young man arrives on his moped. Remember, he has been wronged by Rosetta, and rejected by her.

The young man comes into the scene – not as a *deus ex machina* from *behind* the scenes. But he enters the gap in Rosetta's and our expectations. He doesn't deny the gap, he transforms it, reaches across it. With love and understanding. That's the gesture of the shepherd.

Prayer

God of the gaps,

Teach us to look for you – not hidden, waiting behind the scenery,
but revealed now in the midst of us.

Help us to discern you – not in *our* expectations,
but in *your* truth.

To recognise you – not only in the sermon chapters,
but in the story chapters: the stories of our lives, and yours.

And finally, to come to you – not through our merits,
but your mercy.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and shepherd.

Amen.

Colin Heber-Percy

Lent 2019

