

Faith : Incarnation not Decoration

NIL
by
MOUTH

Dispensing Reality Without Spoonfeeding It

"It is most tempting to want to impress hope upon others by delivering it on a plate.
There are other ways of communicating."

A parable communicates with the inner self. It is a tool for saying hard things, or mysterious things in a pleasant, often entertaining way.
Advertisers employ it regularly. The church less so.

The Bible relies heavily upon the power of story. When considering parables we often think of Jesus' stories, but the Old Testament is full of symbolic tales and imagery.

For example, the psalms regularly use the word like...
"We have escaped, like a bird from a hunter's trap..."

In an age where we are surrounded and bombarded with rhetoric
(which we know instinctively will come to nothing)
stories and parables make a welcome and **refreshing** change.

Of course, the problem with a parable is that it leaves you open to misinterpretation,
but it is that same vulnerability which opens discussion and encourages others to
draw near and discover more.

I have offered no explanation with each of these stories,
you may well discover pearls of your own hidden in them...

How can we sum up the value of that which is priceless? It's like a woman who bought an instant lottery ticket in a news agents, and found she'd won the £50,000 prize. What does she do? She's so excited she dances down the street, leaps into the air and accidentally flings the ticket into a newly laid cement path, belonging to the house just next to the shop. Unable to pull it out and retrieve it she returns home, sells her flat, goes back and buys the house where she dropped the ticket. Then she hires a builder to break up the cement path so she can get hold of the ticket again and claim the prize.

Or it's like a man who won the £10 million Jackpot, but then couldn't find his ticket. He turned his house upside-down, carried all his furniture outside, turned out his wardrobes, x-rayed his pets, interrogated his relatives. When he finally found the ticket, in the place he'd put it for safekeeping, he carried it everywhere he went. He kept it sealed inside a plastic wallet, which was chained to his wrist with his grandfather's gold watch chain. He kept himself awake drinking black coffee and playing loud music. He avoided any other distractions, just in case he should take his eyes off the ticket again and lose his prize. When he finally came to claim his money - he handed over the ticket, took the cash and went straight out to throw the biggest party he could possibly afford...

How should we describe what is indescribable... it's like standing outside a cupboard, the door is plain, boring, of little obvious interest. But on opening the cupboard all kinds of treasure may be discovered. Wonderful, precious, dangerous, intriguing items fill the place. Jewels drip from the shelves, gilt edged books sag open revealing untold mystery and wisdom. Rich dark secrets drape from the ceiling. But how may this treasure be discovered, if we only stand on the outside of the cupboard, gazing from afar at a rather plain, wooden door?

Once there was a man and a woman who lived next door to each other. They were both rather shy and so were often unsure what to say to one another. As time went by they began to avoid each other, and became increasingly worried about the possibility of meeting one another. The man began using his back door to come and go, and walked the long way to work to avoid seeing his neighbour in the usual traffic jam. They became so skilled at avoiding one another that soon they weren't sure if they were still neighbours, or indeed if the other person was still living in the same town. Just to be on the safe side, the man hired a team of labourers, to construct a wall between the two premises. However, one day there was a knock on the door, it was the neighbour, her house had been burgled and she needed to use the phone. They chatted for a while, the man helped her clear up, and lent her some of the things she needed. When his car broke down two weeks later she gave him a lift to work. Within 6 months they had fallen in love, and were wondering why it had taken so long to get to know one another...

A group of people arrived in Chocolate World. The visit was unplanned, none of them had expected to drop in so soon. But their host was most welcoming. There were many departments in Chocolate World, he informed them, all tastes catered for - the liqueur filled, the rich dark, the solid slabs, the soft centres; places for those who only ate chocolate, and places for those who welcomed any kind of sweet. Some were surprised at this last group being present, but they were all duly ushered off to their respective rooms. One group remained, however, they didn't know about liqueurs, truffles, or soft centres - they just loved chocolate. The host smiled, "So do I" he said, and he gave them complete freedom of the place...

The kingdom is rather like a Magic Eye Picture - you look at it for a long time and can make no sense of it. It seems strange, distant, frustrating, annoying. You feel you're an outsider, deprived and frustrated by those already in the know. They cannot make you see it for yourself, though they may try to push you into it. Then one day - it clicks. The view changes, the vision alters, and your eyes adjust to the new world before them. The 2 dimensional takes on new shape, images leap out at you, the objects move before your gaze, and suddenly you are inside - no longer squinting from a distance, but revelling in this amazing new experience. And though it may not always happen easily, you will always be part of this new kingdom of colour, beauty, light and shade - no longer an outsider, but understanding that which was only a blurred enigma before...

Once there was a man and woman who fell in love. They married and lived happily together until the wife began seeing another man. The wife was very beautiful, and it wasn't long before they embarked on a passionate affair and conducted this in secret for several months. Eventually the inevitable happened, the husband came home early one day and discovered the two of them together. It was an awful situation and a terrible decision to have to make - but he decided to forgive her, and start again. Well, the months went by and the two fell back in love and it was as if nothing had ever gone wrong. The husband decided to book them a second honeymoon, so he called up the travel agents, and then phoned his wife to break the good news. When a familiar male voice answered the telephone he feared the worst, went straight home and confronted his wife again. She was alone, there had been no other man she claimed. Nothing was wrong. In the year that followed she had three affairs, her husband knew of them all, but pretended to be ignorant of them. Eventually she moved out - left a note and disappeared into the early morning with an old case and a mind full of promises from her dozen male friends. They all came to nothing. When her husband finally tracked her down again she was working in a brothel. She was a sick woman, no longer the stunning bride he had married, just a dying prostitute, with no friends or future to look to. It broke his heart to see her wasting away, and though she had hurt him so badly and cost him so much, he could never give up on the one he had always loved. So, with a body no more than a bundle of rags he lifted her carefully into his arms, paid off the old hag who now owned her and carried her gently home, in the hope that he might bring her back to life and win her love again...

Once there was a farmer who went out to sow his crops. He gathered together the bags of seed, bought in extra fertiliser and set to work. He threw open all the windows of the farmhouse and called out enthusiastically to the acres of fertile fields that lay expectantly before him. He beckoned to them, waved the sacks of fertiliser, offered them the bags of seed and demonstrated how important it was for the crops to be sown. But the fields wouldn't budge. Day after day the farmer went to the front door and waited, but the land never came any closer. Occasionally he resorted to throwing large handfuls of the crop out of the bedroom windows, but it only fell on the path and was scooped up by the wind and the birds. Come harvest time his barns were still empty and he sadly wondered why the fields were so stubborn, and the land was so bare...

A young man marched into a large department store with a shot-gun. When the gun jammed and his plan backfired, the police turned up and after a struggle, bundled him into the back of their van. However, in their hurry to get back the driver skidded whilst taking a bend, careered over a line of traffic cones and smashed into the back of a patrol car. In the ensuing confusion the young man escaped, with a badly sprained ankle and two black eyes. The following week he returned to the department store and held it up again. This time he was armed with an air pistol which the police tore from his battered fingers as they easily bundled him into the back of their recently repaired van. When the van broke down on the motorway they called out a squad car, but that was called away on route to chase a couple of joy riders. When the breakdown van eventually arrived it was unable to toe the van away as the steering had locked. When the lorry turned up to carry the van away there was no room in the truck for the two policeman and the robber, so the policeman called for another squad car. While they were waiting for this the young man made a break for it, and had to be chased for several hours until he collapsed from exhaustion by the side of the road. Weak and starving he was given shelter by an old widow who lived on the moor. So the police lost all sight of him again.

Three days later he walked into the store again, this time armed with an old crossbow. After a four hour siege the police finally arrested him and took him to the station where they interrogated him. They discovered his father had originally designed and owned the large department store but in recent years, through crooked deals and aggressive mergers it had been taken from him, inch by inch, floor by floor. All his father had ever wanted was his store back - and his son was willing to risk everything to get it. When the boy died in custody the story made headline news, and though the new owners of the store never did admit there was any truth in the boy's claims, many of the shareholders then came to visit the old man, to affirm their support, renew old friendships and to offer him their share of the company.

In a legendary country, in a land far away, a man was arrested and charged with living a life of crime. In that country the penalty, should he be found guilty, was death. The night before his trial his closest friend came to visit him. He gave the man some hard advice. Apparently the judge adhered to an unusual code of practice. If a prisoner were to plead guilty then the judge, surprisingly, would declare him innocent. But if the prisoner refused to plead guilty, and claimed innocence, then the judge had no choice but to pronounce him guilty and condemn him to death. The man's friend pleaded with him to admit his guilt, but the risk was a big one. With the death penalty hanging over him, could he have the courage to plead guilty, in the hope of being pronounced innocent...

Be careful you don't win the lottery - only to misplace you're ticket.

Life's like a box of chocolates - you never know what you're gonna get. Unless of course you take the time to look carefully at the box and realise that the information is all there for you, written on the inside of the lid.

A man once discovered a suitcase, abandoned in the road. It felt as if it were pretty full but he was too embarrassed to open it in public so he wandered away and left it. A woman came along and did open the case, but she was horrified by the contents and hastily scurried away to tell her friends about it. Before long a man tripped over it and he too had a good look, then went off to write a book on what was inside. Finally a little girl came along, opened the case, saw that it was full, picked it up and carried the whole thing off with her...

A wealthy jeweller had the finest store in town. He'd made millions by living frugally, charging the earth and carefully storing the profit... Until one day a thief broke in, shot him dead and took off with the money. Years later they met again. The thief was there for trying to take the old man's money, the jeweller was there for trying to hold on to it...

Faith is like a precious stone. Twist it turn it, examine it and you'll discover many facets. Wear it thoughtfully and humbly and you'll be honoured and recognised. Spend too much time debating it's beauty and you'll forget the reason for which you acquired it.

A few months ago I acquired a wonderful new waste bin. I decorated it, polished it and coated it with varnish. I loved this waste bin and carried it everywhere with me, until the day I had a harrowing experience when I brought it out at a party to impress my friends. I proudly passed it round the assembled company - and they were all suitably impressed. Then one young man chose to look inside. Well, first, he reacted violently to the smell, and then went on to pull out three empty whiskey bottles, a baby's nappy and a dead fish. I don't brag about the bin any more. Although it still shines on the outside.

He is like a big, bouncy castle, or a huge inflatable ship to jump and play and slide on, with soft corners to snuggle and hide in when you want to be alone. And his heart is one huge billowing banqueting hall with mountains of cushions like barrage balloons for pillow fights and parties. And at night with him you'll never be afraid of the dark, but instead just grow suitably sleepy; except for those glorious, indulgent occasions when you tuck into a midnight feast together. And when the sailing with him finally begins there'll be stories and games and laughter and everyone will be friends. And life will be full of those things which we only dream about now...

A young man stands in a market place. His life is for sale. His hands are chained, his body bruised and his head aches from repeated beatings. Three days previously he was abducted, sealed in a sack and transported to this foreign market. Now he is for sale, offered as a prize or a slave - whichever fetches the highest price. He flinches beneath the glare of the sun and the gloating faces, he hasn't eaten since he left home. The outcome is eventually decided, a rich prince will have the boy at a moderate price - he will do for the cleaning, and possibly the cooking too, if he's smart. Before the hammer can connect with the auctioneers bench a stranger steps into the scene. He raises a hand and immediately doubles the offer. There is a moment of silence, the prince draws breath, then shakes his head. The boy isn't worth the price. The stranger moves up to the platform, he pays the price and looses the boy's chains. He leads him away from the crowd, hands over a map, money and an air ticket. He tells the boy to go home... The stranger disappears, the boy stumbles into freedom. The ordeal is over.

On a tube station, late one night, a crowd of people gathered, waiting for the last ride home. As the minutes dragged into hours the people grew restless and began to mutter to one another. Eventually the electronic screen came up with a valid excuse about vandals, leaves, dead animals and broken furniture. Normal service would be resumed. As the faces gawped at this someone mentioned food. However, even Mcdonalds was shut at that time of night. Other suggestions were muted and people hunted gloomily in their rucksacks and handbags. Not much was found. One boy produced a full lunch box, but amongst that crowd it wouldn't go far. Someone suggested pooling the little they all had, an old tramp gave advice on scouring the waste bins. A few teenagers opted to walk half the night to the nearest garage.

Others proclaimed the benefits of the chocolate and crisps to be found at an exorbitant price in the station machines. Amongst the clamour for food no one really noticed that most of the kids were busily tucking in to the recently rejected lunch box. The sandwiches were good and fresh and the Coke bottle seemed to pass round the large group an infinite number of times. Afterwards, while the older children took the leftovers to those out sleeping rough, no one seemed to be able to track down the boy who had first offered his lunch, and the adults wondered why their offspring weren't that interested in the meagre scraps they had managed to scavenge, beg or steal.

The human heart is rather like an old attic. It's a place of storage, a place of memories. We wander through it and discover things long forgotten, things we kept for a rainy day, things we have hidden. We seldom take our visitors there and even our families only get a rare glimpse. But sometimes, on vacant rainy days we may drag the one we most love up those dusty steps through the cobwebs and memories and share an hour of laughter and hope, healing and tears as we uncover what we most treasure and most fear. The human heart is a place of storage, but like any attic, it may only hold so much, so we do well to fill it with precious things.

Two ex-cons met in a strip-joint. As they chatted they discovered that they had served time in the same prison. Both had been in for armed robbery. "What d'you rob?" asked one. "A liquor store," replied the other, "in Manhattan." He named a street. The other frowned. "You killed my brother," he said. "He ran that place, had a weak heart, the trauma killed him." The other man looked into his drink. "I don't know what to say..." he mumbled. "I never intended that. What about you?" The other man shrugged. "A drugstore, two blocks away." Now the other guy frowned. "That was my brother's store," he said. "He never recovered from the shock." The other man drained his glass. "In that case we're even." he said. "No," said the other, "my brother was 35. That's no age." Another shrug. "Sure, but mine was 14." They faced each other grimly across the table, then turned to watch the oblivious world as it passed them by. Eventually, after an age had passed, they spoke again. "Listen - this isn't easy, but I'm sorry." "Yea, me too." And they each took the other's outstretched hand.
"Now we're even," they said.

Walking through town one day I noticed a large silver Rolls Royce. The occupants appeared to be scanning the surrounding shops and buildings. They stopped and asked me the way to a particular building. I described the route as best I could and watched them pull away. When they came to a fork in the road, the right lane looked rather narrow and so, though it took them in the wrong direction, they eased down the left one, I called after them but they had moved out of earshot. I continued walking and took the right fork. A little later they passed me again, just as we were both nearing our destination, however instead of stopping they merely slowed to a crawl, then revved and pulled away again. I continued walking and went inside.

Half an hour later, as I emerged from the building they were still cruising up and down the road searching for a suitable parking place. For days after that I frequently saw the Rolls Royce as it stalked the roads around that area. But it never found a suitable stopping place, and the occupants never seemed to muster the courage to leave their car, take to their feet, and run towards the place they'd been searching for for so long...

It was a blustery winter's day when Sam first set up his stall and hardly anyone took much notice. Apart from one old lady and a rather persistent dog who was intent on lubricating Sam's table legs. However, the next day was a Saturday, and a fair one at that, so a good deal more people were in town, and many stopped to read his sign. Some took the bread, some sneered, others were quickly embarrassed. It wasn't until Sunday that he distributed his first glass of wine, and that was also the day the trouble began. A local priest had in fact spotted him on the Saturday and quickly worked out what was going on. When that same man of the cloth found Sam outside again on the Sabbath he had something to say about it. While they argued openly a small crowd gathered to watch, a tramp and two teenagers helped themselves to the wine and the dog returned to sniff the table legs.

A policeman arrived. Then another. And another. Then a traffic warden, two shop owners and a woman priest. By the time the Bishop turned up, Sam had lost his stall, struck a policeman, resisted arrest, and spent a night in a police cell. He awoke with a headache. The Bishop was a thoughtful, understanding fellow. He listened carefully to Sam's account of the story, weighed it up, then replied in careful, measured tones. "You can't just give out communion on the streets, Sam. Not to all and sundry, it's a precious commodity. That's why we have a carefully organised system, a structure in which to prepare the people and the elements so that those who want to receive may do so prayerfully." Sam shook his head. "And what about those who need to receive it but don't understand church, or find it boring, or irrelevant. Yet they want to reach out and find some kind of hope?"

The Bishop nodded.

"I know what you're saying Sam," he said, "and that's why we must find ways to make our faith more accessible to those outside the church." Sam grabbed at the other man's coat. "That's what I was trying to do!" he yelled, then sobering up again he

continued, "Not long ago I sat in a church service when a tramp wandered in and sat beside me. It was during the Bible reading so, being a coward, I thought it inappropriate to speak to him at that point. The sermon followed immediately after, so that was difficult too. A few minutes later he got up and left. I followed him after that - but he'd gone. There was nothing there to touch his world, yet when Christ first gave bread and wine it was in the context of a simple commonly shared meal! What a gift, we all love eating..." The Bishop nodded, stood up and left. The following week Sam had left that place and moved on to hand out bread and wine in the next town.