

EDITORIAL

COLIN GREENE

THE REVD DR COLIN GREENE is head of theology and public policy at Bible Society and visiting professor of systematic and philosophical theology at Seattle Pacific University, USA. He is author of *Christology and Atonement in Historical Context* and the forthcoming *Marking Out the Horizons: Christology in Cultural Perspective*. He is consultant editor to the Scripture and Hermeneutics seminar.



SIXTEEN HUNDRED YEARS AGO, IN A GARDEN IN MILAN, A YOUNG MAN FROM NORTH AFRICA BECAME A CHRISTIAN BELIEVER. He had been searching for something for many years and had tried quite a few of the spiritual disciplines and therapies on offer. He had a girlfriend, whom he had abandoned, and a little son. He also had a rather overbearing mother who frequently chided him for his fecklessness and apparent lack of personal direction.

The young man managed to find a good job in a university, but his underlying depression weighed him down. As he sat in the garden with tears in his eyes he heard the singsong voice of a child next door, chanting in Latin: “*Tolle, lege ... tolle, lege ...*” (“pick up and read”). In response, the young man took hold of the Scriptures and read: “Arm yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and spend no more thought on nature’s appetites.”

This is a story with which many of us in Christian ministry are familiar. It is the story of the conversion of Augustine, who was destined to become one the greatest philosopher-theologians of the Western Church. Here is another story known to some of us in Bible Society but much less widely disseminated. It is the story of the conversion of Sevetlana, a young woman who lived in Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan: “1994 was a terrible time for my family. I was in despair: I simply didn’t know what to do and on one particular occasion was close to suicide. That very evening was the first time in my life I appealed to God for help. The next morning my Grandmother came to visit and invited me to attend a Christian mission. I went very reluctantly and received a copy of the New Testament as a gift. I started to read it and found I could not stop – I read it practically without interruption for three days. I decided I had to respond somehow, so I went to church with my Grandmother and understood for the first time the meaning of repentance.”

In both these stories some extraordinary connections are forged between people who can no longer make sense of their lives and the powerful compelling story the Bible recounts and the Church re-enacts. The unique genre of literature we call the Gospels similarly make connections between the story of Jesus and the various worlds the Gospel writers were part of and wanted their readers better to understand. It is interesting to note where their respective stories begin.

Mark’s Gospel starts with Jesus proclaiming the imminence of the coming kingdom of God in the

context of other religious and political reform movements that had also reactivated ancient hopes and aspirations in the midst of the poverty and hardship of first-century Palestine. Matthew, however, establishes another connection point through the use of a genealogy that sweeps back to include the whole history of Israel. Luke presses still further back, this time with a genealogy that links the coming of the Messiah with Adam and consequently the whole history of humanity. This process of expanding the significance of the Jesus story is brought to completion with the prologue to John’s Gospel. Here the most daring connection of all is forged between the advent of Jesus and the pre-existent Word of God who was one with God before the act of creation. In all of this we find a growing conviction that the Jesus story is simply *the* Story through which not only the individual person but the whole created order finds its proper place and destiny. In other words, the Gospel writers were not shy about making connections, and neither should we be either.

This issue of the *Bible in TransMission* seeks to explore some important contemporary connection points between Word and Worship in the context of contemporary culture. Both Chris Sunderland and Luke Bretherton point out that even in the media saturated hyper-reality of postmodernity we should never lose sight of the power of the Scriptures both in storytelling and preaching. Like some others in our storytelling partnership with the Northumbria community, Chris has been exploring and developing the art of making connections between biblical stories and other powerful stories that emerge within the political and economic fabric of everyday life. Luke sees in the morality of preaching a way to avoid both the false utopianism and cynicism of much contemporary political rhetoric. In both instances we are reminded that a gospel that is deliberately tailor-made only for the individual cannot do justice to the breadth and scope of the biblical narrative.

Trish McLean opens up for us the Pandora’s box of contemporary spirituality, a phenomenon that appears to have taken the Church by surprise and to which it struggles to relate. Might this be because many of our churches fail to see this phenomenon as the effect rather than the cause of a deeper malaise? In a world that has been so radically disenchanted by the excesses of narcissistic consumerism, free market economics and manipulative technology, it is not surprising that many

► look for other sources of enchantment, indeed, other signals of transcendence.

This, of course, is also the challenge that faces the Church when it comes to making connections with contemporary people through the avenue of creative Christian worship and liturgy. Both Brian Draper and Sally Morgenthaler invite us to leave behind the dumbed down, lowest common denominator approach to worship that has been the stable diet of many who are still locked into the secularism of the 1970s and 1980s. Whether it is what is often rather euphemistically referred to as all-age worship or the big praise and worship event, both often pander to cultural antecedents we have now thankfully left behind.

Brian makes a passionate plea for worship that actually takes the rich vein of cultural diversity seriously and so can release people into a flourishing relationship with God, or as John Wesley often put it, able to enjoy God and themselves. Sally comes up with a startling but refreshingly appropriate phrase that should be the motto of any involved in thinking about or planning worship, “unprecedented listening and uncompromising liturgy”. The community approach to worship she has been pioneering seems to me at least to take worship out of the temple and on to the streets in a way that is rarely achieved in our churches. Again, one can’t help wondering why this is so? It might simple be, as Sally suggests, that worship and, indeed, telling the story of Jesus were always intended to be multi-dimensional meeting places between God, the Church and ordinary people. Hopefully this issue of *TransMission* will help us better understand and explore these connections. ✎