

# What a Performance!

by *Stephen C Barton*

*A number of articles in recent editions of The Bible in TransMission have recognised the challenge of recovering the overarching biblical story of Scripture as a key element in the Church's missionary engagement with culture. The prevailing influence of historical-critical methods of biblical criticism over the past two centuries may have contributed to the erosion of the Bible's identity as Scripture, both in Church and academy; but we are now faced with the opportunities of discovering new models of exegesis for a new missionary situation. Considerable attention has recently been given to Performance as an appropriate metaphor for articulating what New Testament interpretation involves. Here, Stephen Barton demonstrates how the performance metaphor has significant potential for the revitalisation of biblical interpretation as a whole. It is an invitation to locate the work of exegesis in the wider context of human and divine action, particularly in relation to Church and society. His exploration is therefore rooted in theology and ecclesiology, and in the relationship of revelation to the building of godly patterns of sociability.*

In the last two decades, there have been several major proponents of the idea that the most fruitful way to think about biblical interpretation is by analogy with what is involved in the interpretation of a musical score or dramatic script. Particularly significant is a seminal essay by Nicholas Lash.<sup>1</sup> In reply to the question "What is involved in the interpretation of texts?", Lash makes the important point that, "for different kinds of text, different kinds of activity count as the fundamental form of their interpretation".<sup>2</sup> According to Lash, among the closest analogies to biblical interpretation are the interpretation of a Beethoven score or a Shakespearean tragedy.

Thus, for the interpretation of Beethoven it is not suffi-

cient to be able to read the notes of the score and play the instruments with technical accuracy. Nor is it sufficient to know, with the help of a musical historian, in what circumstances the music was composed or how the score was interpreted in the past. Of course, none of these things should be discounted, since playing Beethoven well without them would be impossible. Nevertheless, the central act of interpretation of a Beethoven score is *the performance* which, if it is to inspire or give pleasure, has to be more than a matter of technical accuracy. Instead, there has to be a kind of *creative fidelity* that allows the musical score to come alive again in the present moment. Important also is the recognition that this is a *social activity* involving not just



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orchestra and conductor, but an audience of (more or less informed) listeners and critics as well. There is a sense in which the audience is taking part as well as the performers; and what the score "means" arises out of the convergence of creative contributions from both orchestra and audience in a particular place and time.

This helps to make Lash's point that there are at least some texts that only begin to deliver their meaning in so far as they are "brought into play" through interpretative performance. For Lash, the Bible is one such text, and he states his main thesis thus:

*I want to suggest, first, that, although the texts of the New Testament may be read, and read with profit by anyone interested in Western Culture and concerned for the human predicament, the fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of Scripture is the life, activity and organisation of the believing community. Secondly, that Christian practice, as interpretative action, consists in the performance of texts which are constructed as "rendering", bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering "rendered" the truth of God in human history.<sup>3</sup>*

## Meaning

The performance model suggests that inquiry into the meaning of the Bible is inadequate if it is not at the same time an inquiry into its truth: an inquiry into whether or not creative fidelity to who

and what the text is about makes human transformation possible. Although there are promising signs of change, prompted in part by feminist and liberationist hermeneutics, in part also by various post-liberal theologies, the problem is that conventional exegesis separates meaning and truth, separates the “original” meaning from its meaning “for today”.

If we follow Lash’s performance analogy, then biblical interpretation is not primarily something archaeological. It cannot be if the kind of text the Bible delivers its meaning only as it is “played out” in patterns of human action in Church and society. Rather, it is something practical, personal, communal and political. It is about changing and being changed according to the image of the triune God whose story the Bible tells.<sup>4</sup>

The textual critic, the historian and the philologist will have their roles to play, particularly in suggesting boundaries of sense and usage within which responsible interpretation can take place. But these roles now become subordinate to the larger project of *embodying* the testimony of the text to the triune God in the life of the Church and in society at large. Nor will it be the case that *cognitive* training is the only kind required to become a good interpreter. Other kinds of discipline attain prominence as well, and a whole process of *personal formation* in the skills, practices, routines and virtues of a tradition-bearing community becomes equally important. This is something which both theological ethicists and writers in Christian spirituality have drawn to our attention in recent years.<sup>5</sup>

## The Church

The analogy with the performance of a Beethoven symphony or a Shakespearean tragedy needs to be supplemented at this point. The performance of Beethoven and Shakespeare is a limited activity and the tradition-bearing community it sustains – and by which it is sustained – is relatively circumscribed. Lash himself seems to recognise this when he appeals, towards the end of his essay, to what is

involved in the interpretation of the American Constitution as another approximation of what is involved in interpreting the Bible:

*The fundamental form of the political interpretation of the American Constitution is the life, activity and organisation of American society. That society exists... as the enactment of its constitution. Similarly, we might say that the scriptures are the “constitution” of the Church.*<sup>6</sup>

This is an important supplement. It helps us to see, by analogy, that Christian interpretation of the Bible as in some sense the constitution of the Church is a *full-time affair* – in spatial terms, that the stage on which the meaning of scripture is “played out” is the public domain of human sociability, and that the actors in this drama are (potentially) all of us. It reinforces the claim that interpretation of a text like the New Testament takes place in the day-to-day life of a people, not just in the study of the philologist and historian. Wise interpretation of the Bible, like wise interpretation of the American Constitution, has as its goal a society ordered towards the good and the true, and requires the ongoing exercise of moral discernment by its interpreters.

## Some Implications

In a recent essay on the resurrection<sup>7</sup> Gerard Loughlin argues that the truth of the resurrection does not come from the accumulation of evidence according to the canons of “reasonable religion” naturalistically understood. Rather, it is something eschatological, corporeal and social: the overflowing, stonger-than-death life of God at work in Jesus and, through him, the Church serving the world. The truth of the resurrection, in other words, is found in performance and enactment, in practices which Loughlin calls the “non-identical repetition of Jesus’ life”. This enactment in the life of the Church leads naturally to a consideration of saints:

*It is in the lives of the saints (which finally constitute the life*

*of the Church) that the “event of a transformation” – which is the risen life of Christ – is “made to happen”, again and again, and each time differently. In the life-story of Jesus we see the overcoming of coercive and selfish power through the refusal of violence, the practice of forgiveness and the transformation of suffering. It is this practice which the Church aims to repeat, and in so far as it does, it is inscribed and incorporated into the very life of the crucified and risen Christ.*<sup>8</sup>

Such a way of considering the lives of the saints, and the ways in which their lives might give access to the meaning and truth of the text, has not been part of any course of New Testament interpretation that I know of, nor does it appear in standard introductions to the New Testament. For the work of most exegetes seems almost to be hermetically sealed off from anything that might contaminate the quest for the “purity” of the original meaning of the text or of the historical Jesus “behind” the text. To put it another way, our reading of the New Testament lacks a certain *ecumenicity*. On the one hand, our professionalisation in the academy cuts us off from the sense of belonging to the “communion of saints” in this world and in the world to come, and on the other hand, there is a tendency to ignore those more sacramental traditions – not least those of the Orthodox churches – where the truth to which Scripture testifies is mediated not just by the text itself but also by the “rendering” of the story of God in the lives of saints, martyrs, desert fathers and holy women.<sup>9</sup>

## Transfiguration

Appeal to the Orthodox tradition brings a particular example to mind: the Transfiguration of Christ (Mk 9.2-8 and 11), which, for Orthodox life, liturgy and theology is paradigmatic. For a form critic like Bultmann, the meaning of the Transfiguration is to be found in an essentially rationalising cross-reference to the theophany of Exodus 24 and the post-resurrection christophanies of the gospels. The verdict is

that the Transfiguration is a resurrection story retrojected into the ministry of Jesus and “taken up by Mark to serve as a heavenly ratification of Peter’s confession and as a prophecy of the Resurrection in pictorial form”.<sup>10</sup> The consequence is that the gospel testimony is evacuated of any sense of spiritual reality. As Donald Evans points out, in interpretations like this, Kantian relativism and common sense empiricism have won the day.<sup>11</sup>

Could it be, therefore, that we would do well to look elsewhere, to the lives of saints and mystics, for better access to the meaning and truth of this story? In particular, we might attend to the kind of “transfiguration” experience of a saint like Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) as both shared and narrated by his disciple Nicolas Motovilov:

*After these words I glanced at his face, and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling light of its mid-day rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you do not see his hands, you do not even see yourself or his body, but only a blinding light spreading far around for several yards and lighting up with its brilliance the snow-blanket which covers the forest glade and the snow flakes which continue to fall unceasingly... “What do you feel?” Father Seraphim asked me. “An immeasurable well-being” I said. “But what sort of well-being? How exactly do you feel?” “I feel such calm” I answered, “such peace in my soul that no words can express it”.<sup>12</sup>*

But my point about saints as performers of Scripture goes further than finding in the lives of the saints analogies of a phenomenological kind which may serve to widen our horizons and therefore our hermeneutical options. For what I want to suggest is that we *can* only understand what the Transfiguration might mean and whether or not it is true if the reality which the narrative displays in *mediated* to us through the passage of time

in the lives of the communion of those who have been touched by “the weight of glory”.

The saints, of course, are not only those individuals who have been canonised or who belong to ages long past. In this century, for example, Fowl and Jones have drawn our attention to Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a “performer of Scripture”;<sup>13</sup> Richard Lischer has written along similar lines about Martin Luther King Jr;<sup>14</sup> and Ann Loades has written about the extraordinary but also ambiguous legacy of Simone Weil as the embodiment of a Christian understanding of sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in a more general way, what is true of individual saints past and present is true also of the Church as “the communion of saints”. Indeed, in the eye of faith, it is by no means only in the ongoing life of the Church that the testimony of people we might want to call “saints” is to be found. There are those *outside* the Church who bear the weight of glory in particular ways also, and who in so doing help us to understand better the reality to which the New Testament testifies. My main point, however, is that saints and “the saints” are an irritant and a provocation to the biblical critic. They are a reminder that interpretation as performance is an essentially embodied, ecclesial-societal activity, the enactment of the biblical “script” as the life of a people through time, given over in love to the service of the world.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

What I am arguing is that recent developments in hermeneutics are opening the way for a *new paradigm* for biblical interpretation. This paradigm is one which sets interpretation in a framework of divine and human action. Now, the Bible is seen as unique testimony to the “performance” of the triune God, and true interpretation is a matter of so embodying the text as to become part of that performance, sharing in the divine life. To use a remarkable image, it is like the prophet *ingesting* the

words of the Lord written on the scroll in order to be a prophet and to do a prophet’s work (Ezek 3.1-3; cf Rev 10.8-11).<sup>17</sup>

This understanding of the art of biblical interpretation is a radical one. What it represents is a call for nothing less than a *change of culture* in biblical interpretation and therefore, insofar as the two are related, in society as a whole. This alternative culture will be a culture critically *open to faith and conversion*, because that is what is involved in allowing the text-inscribed story of God to become our story, its time to become our time, its space to become the space we inhabit also. To put it another way, the “hermeneutics of suspicion” will be seen as *not suspicious enough*, as foreclosing prematurely on the meaning and truth of the text by failing to attend *with love* to what lies, sharply etched, on the surface: the story of God reconciling the world to himself.<sup>18</sup>

It will be a culture also characterised by *risk, struggle and new-found freedom*, because there is no scientific method to guarantee assured results when the goal in view is human transformation by authentic performance. Here, historical and literary criticism will play an important but limited part in contributing to close readings of the text historically informed. And to be “historically informed” will demand patient attention to the *full history* of the text – the history of its formation and the history of its “effects” both in generations past and up to the present.<sup>19</sup> This will involve, in turn, a culture of interpretation critically open to the witness and worship of the Church and other faith communities, an *ecclesial and ecumenical* culture in which virtuosic performances of saints both within the Church and outside it will serve as guides to true performance. The resources here for a recovery of the life-giving potential of Scripture are enormous.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Lash “Performing the Scriptures” in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM,

- 1986) pp 37-46; cf also his other essay, "What Might Martyrdom Mean?" *ibid* pp 75-92.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid* p 40.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid* p 42 (author's emphasis).
- <sup>4</sup> For more on this cf Stephen C Barton *Invitation to the Bible* (London: SPCK 1997) pp 12-27.
- <sup>5</sup> See for example Stanley Hauerwas *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: UNDP 1981); and L Gregory Jones *Embodying Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1995); *idem* "A Thirst for God or Consumer Spirituality? Cultivating Disciplined Practices of Being Engaged by God" in *Modern Theology* 13/1 (1997) pp 3-28; Andrew Louth *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon 1983); Diogenes Allen "Intellectual Inquiry and Spiritual Formation" in David F Ford and Dennis L Stamps eds *Essentials of Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1996) pp 253-256; Craig L Dykstra "The Formative Power of the Congregation" in J Astley *et al* eds *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996) pp 252-264.
- <sup>6</sup> Lash *ibid* p 43 (author's emphasis).
- <sup>7</sup> Gerard Loughlin "Living in Christ": Story, Resurrection and Salvation" in G D'Costa ed *Resurrection Reconsidered* pp 118-134, at 128.
- <sup>8</sup> Loughlin *ibid* p 131.
- <sup>9</sup> See further the moving essay by Georges Florovsky "On the Veneration of the Saints" in his collection of essays *Creation and Redemption* (Belmont MA: Nordland 1976) pp 201-208.
- <sup>10</sup> R Bultmann *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell 1963) p 260. More detailed and interesting is the essentially *religionsgeschichtlich* study by H C Kee "The Transfiguration in Mark: Epiphany or Apocalyptic Vision?" in J Reumann ed *Understanding the Sacred Text* (Valley Forge: Judson 1972) pp 137-152, but again the conclusion is reductionist: Mark's story is a "literary device" intended to convey a "message of assurance". Only a *message*?
- <sup>11</sup> D Evans "Academic Scepticism, Spiritual Reality and Transfiguration" in L D Hurst and N T Wright eds *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon 1987) pp 175-186.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Timothy Ware *The Orthodox Way* (London: Penguin 1993) p 119.
- <sup>13</sup> Stephen E Fowl and L Gregory Jones *Reading in Communion* pp 135-164; compare also Jürgen Moltmann *The Way of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM 1990) pp 196-204 where Moltmann cites the cases of contemporary martyrs Paul Schneider and Arnulfo Romero, as well as Bonhoeffer, as among those who share in "the fellowship of Christ's sufferings".
- <sup>14</sup> Richard Lischer "Martin Luther King Jr: 'Performing' the Scriptures" in *Anglican Theological Review* LXXVII (1995) pp 160-172.
- <sup>15</sup> Ann Loades "Simone Weil – Sacrifice: A Problem for Theology" in D Jasper ed *Images of Belief in Literature* (London; Macmillan 1984) pp 122-137.
- <sup>16</sup> See further Robert L Wilken's excellent essay "The Lives of the Saints and the Pursuit of Virtue" in his *Remembering the Christian Past* pp 121-144; and, for a liberationist perspective on the saints see Leonardo Boff *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation* (London: SCM 1985).
- <sup>17</sup> Compare Gerard Loughlin *Telling God's Story* where part One is entitled "Consuming Text" and Chapter 8 "Eating the Word".
- <sup>18</sup> See further Rowan Williams "The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer" in R H Bell ed *The Grammar of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1988) pp 36-53.
- <sup>19</sup> Relevant here is Anthony Thisleton "Knowledge, Myth and Corporate Memory" in *Believing in the Church: The Corporate Nature of Faith. A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England* (London: SPCK 1981) pp 45-78.