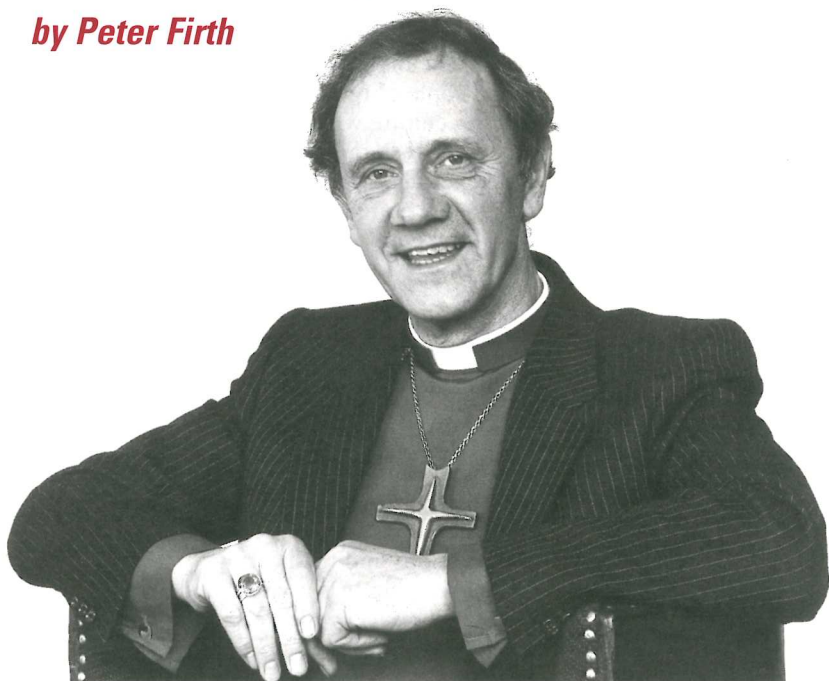


Human Stories and Human Journeys

by Peter Firth



The Rt Revd Peter Firth was Bishop of Malmesbury from 1983 to 1994. After a period of parish-based ministry in Worcestershire and inner-city Manchester, he joined the BBC and became Senior Religious Producer for radio and television. The themes in this article are developed in his latest book *The Love that Moves the Sun* (DLT 1996).

As it seeks to relate the gospel to contemporary culture, the Church finds itself addressing the challenges presented by the mass media. For instance, if the essence of the gospel is found in a book, how can it become an effective shaping force in a culture that is more attuned to the televisual? Similarly, how can a local congregation “open the book” to the community it serves when most people rarely read anything at all? Here, Peter Firth suggests that, by recovering the human dimension of the Bible, the Church can effectively convey its meaning by developing an appropriate spirituality in a culture that communicates with all the senses.

Peter Brooks was a Congregationalist minister who made over 500 television programmes. He defined four links in the chain of human communication: (i) a communicator; (ii) a message; (iii) receivers; (iv) a medium for reaching them. If any of these links is absent, sub-standard or simply wrong, communication does not take place. Hitler observed these requirements as effectively as Jesus did.

Finding the Right Wavelength

Christian communicators have no trouble with the first three links in the chain. It is the fourth one which so often finds us wanting. We proclaim and preach, we argue, we link the message with morality, with law, with self-fulfilment, with total obedience, with philanthropy. And we wonder why so little seems to get through. We (the

► communicators) have a message (the Gospel) intended for all people (the receivers). The reason why communication so often fails is less to do with the deafness of the receivers and more to do with us not finding their wavelength.

Book Culture

As the millennium draws to a close, we must recognize that our greatest strength often appears to be one of our weaknesses: the Bible. We are called the "People of the Book". In the reading culture which predominated between the Reformation and the middle of this century, religious literature teemed out of the presses and was engaged with. In previous eras, when reading was not an option for the majority of people, they graced their churches with splendour in stone, with mosaics, and Bible stories in painting and glass which appealed to the visual senses. Music which accompanied the liturgy, and later, great oratorios and cantatas, touched the emotions and the hearing senses. Worship was a visual and aural experience, which also engaged the senses of smell and touch. In many diverse ways, the word of God became flesh, recognizable, human. The Church conveyed the meaning of the Bible through all the senses and provided the cultural background to the whole of life.

Television

Today, television provides the cultural background. It is fragmentary, amoral, fleeting yet compelling. Through advertising it presents the superficially desirable life. It thrives on novelty, tragedy and scandal. It gives the impression of knowledge and authority, but never has the time in which to weigh the information provided. Yet it is also a lifeline of sorts to the elderly, the sport-lover, the bored and the unemployed. It is a market place, where a whole range of interpretations of the meaning of life can be picked and chosen, from *Songs of Praise* to *Star Trek*, and from *The X Files* to *Brookside*.

Human Drama

What place does the Bible have in this pictorial chaos which assaults our minds as well as our senses, and how can the Church relate the gospel effectively to a culture in which Christianity is just one of many choices available in the superstore of world views?

I have no doubt that we need to understand how the Bible can touch all the human senses. For example, *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* consistently top the television ratings. Consequently, the Church needs to find ways of presenting the Bible as a sequence of human dramas and events which eventually explodes in the most amazing life ever lived – a life which changed the history of the world more than any other. For me, the message of the Bible is one of a thousand years of preparation for an eruption in human form of that energy which generates the whole show.

That preparation is largely a series of storylines rooted in human history. You need stories before you can proclaim doctrine. In science, you conduct experiments (a series of stories) before you proclaim a theory. In life, you undergo a sequence of innumerable experiences before you reach conclusions about its meaning. The experiences combine to create your centre of gravity and overall "feel" of life, just as the images and values which invade our lives through television create a view of life and the world that can dominate our culture.

Being Alive

The philosopher Wittgenstein once declared that there is only one miracle – that anything is at all. The sagas of the patriarchs, of Moses and Joshua, of Saul and David, of Ezra and Jeremiah, of John the Baptist and Peter, are all storylines about journeys, in which people wrestled with the mystery of being alive at all. In their different ways they are adventures which are more compelling than *Star Trek* or *Voyager* and their associated subcultures. The task of the Church as it preaches and teaches is to present this as evidence of the endless human journey

towards God. This is the God who declared himself to Moses as "He Who Is"; or put another way, as *isness*, the way things are.

We cannot package faith and offer it as yet another commodity in the market place. But we can offer a prophetic vision of truth and reality which speaks to all the senses, which inspires people to go on their own journeys, helping them to discover that *isness* which is within us and around us in the world. The Bible provides us with a series of explorations which leads to the discovery of that *isness* in Jesus Christ. It is about people in movement towards, people in search of, people encountering, the one who, in the poet Dante's words, "moves the sun and the other stars". To see these scattered bones of human experience united in Christ is to communicate the meaning of the Bible in a way that is immediate and concrete. To do otherwise is to freeze the story and the journey in icy print. Whenever we see our own lives as journeys into God, we offer the image-orientated world new and visible chapters of the continuing story of the word being made flesh in the developing life of the Church.

New Stories

This is not a matter only for professional theologians. Every Christian congregation can write new chapters in this unfolding story. In any local church – and the wider community it serves – there is a Moses who speaks and an Aaron who follows; there is a Peter who betrays and a Thomas who doubts, There is an overpassionate David and a Susannah who values her virginity as a gift from God. There is an Ezra with a building vision and a Mary who watches and prays. There are Jacobs who wrestle with God all night in prayer and Amoses who fight for justice. The list is endless.

To share such visions and journeys is the way in which people become aware of their *convergence* on the things of God. It is also the way in which God weaves our separate stories into the activity of Christ, as we come to see in our own lives the continuing story and journey of the Bible. ■