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Embracing the Cross as a Prelude to New Hope

by Martin Robinson

So far in my life I have lived in four different cultures, some dramatically different, others only partly so. India, Scotland, England and the United States of America have been my home for significant portions of time. To cross a cultural boundary is to be reminded that the culture you have tasted is sustained by a complex web of stories. These stories celebrate heroes and villains, triumphs and tragedies.

Contrasts and Contradictions

Even as a teenager, I was struck by the contrasting popular accounts of Scottish and English histories. While in Scotland, I was under the very firm impression that the Scots had won most of the battles fought against the English. The shorthand, folk account of history continued along these lines: despite heroic victories, Scotland was now an occupied country largely due to the treachery of some Scots, most of whom appeared to be from the banking fraternity. When I moved to England I was surprised to discover that contrary to all I had learnt before, the English had won most of the battles against the Scots and that eventually English resources had to be used to help out the Scots when they failed to look after their own affairs properly. These contrasting accounts can be viewed with a sense of humour by most of the inhabitants of England and Scotland but cultures in severe conflict take their stories very

seriously indeed. Similar things could be said about the way in which the history of the Reformation has been taught in our predominantly Protestant culture. Recent accounts of this complex period of upheaval in these islands, by scholars such as Eammon Duffy and Jack Scarisbrick, have enabled us to understand the issues from a different perspective.

Perspective

Brian Lennon, in his book *After the Cease-fires*, written to consider the future of Northern Ireland, tells the respective stories of the two communities in Northern Ireland with great insight and sensitivity. Other competing stories can be found on both sides of the Israeli – Arab conflict, or the Serb – Croat enmity. Sectarian stories all too often feed hatred, justify oppression and cause a blindness to the shortcomings of our own tribe and culture. In the same book, Brian Lennon, a Jesuit priest, points to the story of the gospel as offering a source of hope by reminding us of a larger story in which all of humanity can participate and from which we can all derive new meaning. Our smaller, or tribal, stories need to be interpreted from the perspective of this larger gospel story.

Heritage and Culture

The common history of Europe reminds us that this is precisely the way that the story of the

Bible has operated in the past. The tribes of Europe, each with their own story, were invited to rework those stories in the light of a biblical meta-narrative. That unifying biblical story allowed a common European identity, heritage and culture to emerge that was distinct from the voices of other continents and cultures. The dramatic expansion of the church around the world in the 19th and 20th centuries challenges us to rethink even this common European view of the gospel in the light of the emerging Asian, Latin American and African understandings of the Bible.

Failure and Renewal

Paradoxically, to take the theology of other continents seriously is also to rediscover the riches of the story of the Bible for our own culture. This is not an easy task. Colin Greene in his article, "What sort of Story - What sort of Church?" reflects creatively on the issues we face when attempting such a task. He makes the essential link between story and church. To be challenged afresh by the story is to rethink what it means to be the church. If we are to help our culture rethink, re-imagine its own future on the basis of the biblical story then we too, as the church which attempts to live out the story in community will be changed by the experience. Part of that experience will include the way of the cross – rejection, failure, suffering, pain and death. Indeed this would be too much to bear if it were not also

the case that the Christian story does not rest there but ends with the resurrection and the sending of the life giving spirit. As Tom Smail has pointed out so forcibly in his writings, there is no way to the resurrection except by way of Calvary. For the Church, growth and renewal may well come; but it will certainly not begin from a position of triumph – either real or imagined. ■