

B r i e f i n g

Free to Believe

The Map is not the Territory



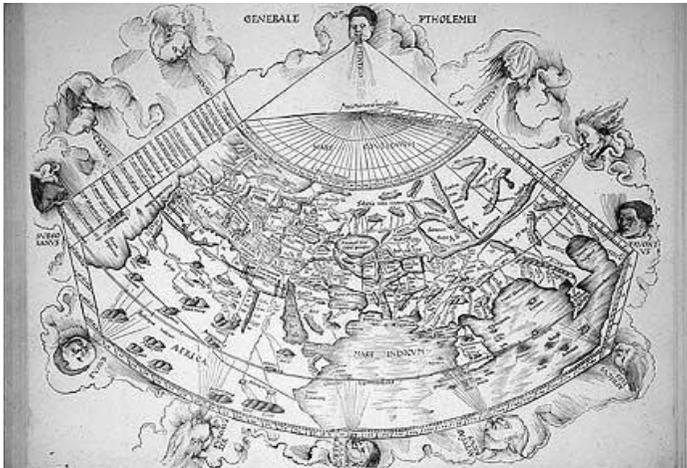
Spring 2014

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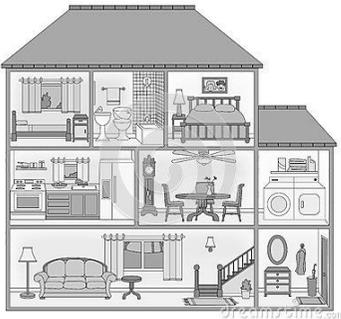
Could you write an interesting article, a book review, a poem, a litany for use in a liberal gathering, a reflection - or might you be able to draw a cartoon - for *Briefing*? Would you like to offer a report or photograph after the March National Conference? Please send submissions for the Summer *Briefing* by 15th May 2014 to the editor, Kate Compston, The Flat, 1 Morwenna Terrace, Bude, Cornwall EX23 8BU, or to kate.compston@googlemail.com



I am fascinated by maps, even if I've never been very good at finding my way with their help (this has to do with the lack of any sense of direction on my part: I can all too easily be on the right road, but going west instead of east, north instead of south.) I love Ordnance Survey maps, the schematized maps of the London Underground, weather maps, demographic maps, Peters-projection maps, tourist maps that show Cornish waters as heaving with shapely mermaids, world 'south-up' maps, and so many others And how much more I love the old maps! – the ones where the size of a town, nation or continent is vastly inflated because of what was perceived as its power or importance, or because of some ideology (e.g. the conviction that Jerusalem was the centre of the world); and the ones that illustrate unknown, and seemingly dangerous, territory with the legend "Here be dragons!" I like to see how our knowledge of the planet we inhabit has dramatically changed over the centuries.

I ask myself why I like maps so much, and - with these rapid changes and idiosyncratic projections in mind - wonder whether it has to do with their vulnerability – their built-in, inevitable failure to represent reality. (Some of us love a lost cause ...) There is a kind of mad courage about the doomed attempt to represent the spherical, three-dimensional, very large, multi-flavoured world on only one plane, in two dimensions, ‘in small’, and with a limited palette (or palate!)

But I am aware that the lure of maps could be to do, not with their vulnerability, but with their manageability ... with the fact that we can very easily think we know everything they attempt to represent.



And the same is true of any model. You will probably know one or two people who are far more captivated by their model railways or exquisite dolls’ houses than by the ‘real’ world. (I place ‘real’ in inverted commas for reasons that I will explain in a moment). There is nothing inherently sinister in being fascinated by, and

able to control, the miniature or the schematized, as long as we remember that the models and maps are a kind of virtual world, and that the ‘real’ world is a more complicated system, unlikely to yield as readily to our whims or aspirations. And no sooner do we think of virtual worlds, than we think of the dream worlds of cyberspace, where time- and space-boundaries, personal identities and social interaction can be destroyed and created at the touch of a button - worlds that some people inhabit to the potential detriment of their participation in real relationships, real towns and cities, real countries, real situations, and, indeed, in their ability to engage with ‘reality’ at all.

But what is ‘reality’? This has been the stuff of philosophical debate since time immemorial, and there’s no definitive answer. We work with mythologies and models to such an extent that we often don’t *realize* they’re mythologies and models. At the time when there was no evidence to suppose that the world was round, the agreed ‘reality’ was that the world was flat, and that if an explorer journeyed far enough, he would fall off the edge. We have all kinds of mythologies about what constitutes, for instance, a healthy diet – until a new discovery comes along and tells us that we have been working with distorted maps. Now, with ever more sophisticated offers of virtual reality in the market place, are we likely to lose all sense of what once constituted ‘real life’? Did we – will we - *ever* know the ‘territory’ for sure?

The great Zen master Chuang Tzu dreamed that he was a butterfly. When he woke up, he asked himself, “Am I a man who just dreamed about being a butterfly, or am I a butterfly who now dreams of being a man?”

It would be difficult to maintain day-to-day living, let alone aspire to a good or meaningful life, if we become too preoccupied with whether we are human beings or butterflies: we just have to make a choice about that (whilst enjoying the story and letting it give us some perspective). Similarly, we make choices about what we regard as real, and what we acknowledge as a map or a model or a mythology. Then, in the knowledge that we do actually work for most of the time with maps and models, we make further choices about whether it is important to us that the maps we use give as accurate as possible a representation of reality, or whether there are other interests at stake for us. For instance: Do we choose a model, a belief-system, that will persuade the majority of people to stay quiet and unquestioning of the powers-that-be, and to abide by certain conventions of behaviour (or, more positively, that comforts, makes order out of chaos, inspires to acts of courage, and so on) – even if that model sacrifices what we know or suspect to be the truth?

I guess you will see where I am going with this. We may all agree, in principle, with Alfred Korzybski – that “the map is not the territory”; but if, as I have suggested, our maps, models and metaphors about life – or about God or Jesus - have often become so hard-programmed that we no longer *recognize* that they’re not the territory, then we must decide whether we dare risk raising questions. Are we going to let the Bible and religious tradition be amenable to exploration, to scholarly investigation? And how far are we prepared to go with that? And if scholarly findings should challenge our preconceived notions, what then?



Do we want to stick with maps of the “Here be dragons” variety (quaint and lovely, but not consonant with other models we live by in the contemporary world), or do we want to choose maps, models and metaphors that take scholarship and modern scientific cosmological knowledge into account?

Those who are part of the Free to Believe network have very likely already opted for the latter course, even if some of us don’t want to lose the old maps entirely, but to continue appreciating them as poetry and story, a signpost to truth, but not the territory itself. However – and this is the real crux of what I want to say (as it is of several other contributions to this issue) – even those of us who claim we are dedicated to the search for ‘truth’ should accept that we, too, are dealing with approximations. Maps are no less maps for being contemporary. It may be that many aspects of the current scientific world view will prove, in time, to be less than adequate. It is quite possible that archaeological findings or scholarly Biblical lines of enquiry that have backed much of what we FTB people believe to be true will be superseded. So a certain humility is necessary – a readiness to be proved wrong. “Think it possible that you may be mistaken”, as article 17 of the Quakers’ ‘Advices and Queries’ puts it.

Indeed. But meanwhile, though we must often challenge our assumptions with alternative, different-projection maps, we can only do our best, stay true to that which seems truest, and chart our experience with quiet confidence. Comforting popular embellishments, like buxom mermaids (and a virgin taken up to heaven); or ‘easy’ schematizations, like those of the London underground (and formulae for salvation) must be laid aside.

What I am left wondering about is the apparently receding notion of ‘reality’. The post-modern suggestion is that there is no territory at all, only as many different perceptions as there are minds to perceive, i.e. only the maps and models we’ve made. How might such a suggestion affect our ability or will to live a life of integrity and beauty? Radically? Or not at all?

.....

And if you’re interested, check out ...

Philosophy: *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard, trans.

Sheila Fria Glaser, 1994, University of Michigan Press

History of Religion: *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, J.Z. Smith, 1978, University of Chicago Press

Anthropology, etc: Geoffrey Bateson, ‘Form, Substance and Difference’ in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, 1972/ 2013, University of Chicago Press

Novels: *Lila: An Enquiry into Morals*, Robert M. Pirsig, 1991, Bantam Books

The Map and the Territory, Michel Houellebecq, 2010, Vintage

Prometheus Rising, Robert Anton Wilson, 1988, New Falcon Publications, U.S.

Film: *The Matrix*, Wachowski Brothers

Poem: ‘The Map of Places’, Laura Riding

A Map is not the Territory it Represents

Martin Camroux

Alfred Korzybski was a Polish-American philosopher and scientist who is remembered for developing the theory of general semantics. Korzybski thought that people do not have access to direct knowledge of reality; rather they have access to perceptions and to a set of beliefs which human society has confused with direct knowledge of reality. "The map is not the territory," said Korzybski, "A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness. . . . If we reflect upon our languages, we find that at best they must be considered *only as maps*. A word is *not* the object it represents. . . . the disregard of these complexities is tragically disastrous in daily life and science."



The point is essentially simple. What is portrayed is always more complex than any map – think of the London transport map which is hugely useful but not a guide to distance. So there is always a difference between

the reality and the words we use to describe it - all our knowledge comes through the selective filter of words and concepts.

All this is very clearly relevant to Christian belief. Religious beliefs may approximate to truth but no description of God can ever be objectively accurate. Our Jewish ancestors in faith understood this point a whole lot better than many Christian people do. In Exodus when Moses asks God his name, God responds with a very enigmatic Hebrew phrase that is difficult to translate - perhaps "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be".

I sometimes think that this is one of the least helpful answers given in Scripture. But it's as if God is saying "You'll never grasp who I am". So, deep in our faith tradition is an intentional modesty before the mystery of God, a clear confession that we know what we do not know.

Take the question "Do you believe in God?" I find I can equally honestly answer both yes and no. It is not only that it depends what kind of God we are talking about, but that any definition of God is elusive; we are at a point where the meaning of words begins to fail. When we come to the eternal, always, as Tennyson puts it, there's

A deep beyond the deep
And a height beyond the height
And our hearing is not hearing
And our seeing is not sight.

This does not mean we should give up trying to talk of God. There's another nice quotation from Korzybski: "There are two ways to slide easily through life: to believe everything or to doubt everything; both ways save us from thinking". So I must try to talk of God – though I know I cannot tell you what God is, only how I have experienced God.

What I know is that there are experiences in my life of wonder, mystery, love, awe, forgiveness, grace: moments when a still small voice speaks but no sound is heard – all that which we call the *mysterium tremendum*. To describe what is common to all such moments I use the word GOD to point to a mystery, to a conviction - of faith not certainty - that the ultimate reality of life is the reality of love. I see this most clearly in the life of Jesus.

All of this takes me far beyond anything I can put into words. In an article she wrote for the *Christian Century*, Barbara Brown Taylor referred to a theologian who lived five centuries ago, Nicholas of Cusa, whose big contribution to theology was the notion he called 'learned ignorance.' Nicholas wrote: "God is the unknown infinite

who dwells in light inaccessible and so God's greatest gift to us is 'to know that we do not know.' Nothing more perfect comes to a person."

Barbara Brown Taylor concludes: "In Nicholas's scheme, the dumbest people in the world are those who think they know. Their certainty about what is true not only pits them against each other, it also prevents them from learning anything new. That is truly dangerous knowledge. They do not know that they do not know and their unlearned ignorance keeps them in the dark about most of the things that matter. . . . To know that you do not know is the beginning of wisdom." (*The Christian Century*, 1 June 2001).

For me, it is more profoundly religious to wrestle with the impossibility of knowing God than to imagine that everything about God is simple. Geoffrey Hill is right:

I say it is not faithless
to stand without faith, keeping open
vigil at the site.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if religious leaders everywhere joined hands in a confession of learned ignorance: a humble, graceful act of theological modesty before the infinite mystery that is God; if popes, imams, archbishops, moderators, Christians, Muslims, Jews, joined hands and promised to re-examine their certainties about those exclusive truth claims that divide and sometimes turn violent? Wouldn't it be something if Christians stopped using their truth as a weapon against other Christians? Wouldn't it be something if we Christians stopped saying, "Thus saith the Lord" and instead learned to say, "It is our opinion that . . ."? Wouldn't it be something if Christians let go of certainty about the mind of God on a whole myriad of issues like gay marriage, gay/lesbian ordination, abortion, or stem cell research, and simply learned to say - instead of "we know" - "we believe but we may be wrong"? Goodness, that would be something, wouldn't it?



Give me a map and I'm lost. In my experience the simple printed route of A to B on paper soon conspires to traverse the whole alphabet (and back) when translated on tarmac. A satnav is a little more reassuring, even if the nice young lady's voice urges me to 'turn around at the next opportunity' when she hasn't appreciated the short cut I'm taking.

'Do you know where you're going to?' sang Diana Ross in 1975, echoing yet another of life's Big Questions which challenge, frighten and frustrate human beings in varying proportions. It's a question that demands a map, a way out of chaos into order; a route from doubt to certainty, from impotence to control. No matter that most such requirements are off the map for the Ordnance Survey – religion mapmakers abound and are happy to oblige.

While it may not be entirely helpful, many Muslims claim that Allah already holds the map of your life ('Qadar') and has written down in the Preserved Tablet all that has happened and will happen, which will come to pass as written. According to this belief, a person's action is not caused by what is written in the Preserved Tablet but, rather, the action is written in the Preserved Tablet because Allah already knows all occurrences without the restrictions of time (are you following?).

On the other hand, Allah does not need to force anyone to do good or evil by interfering in his or her will, and nobody will bear witness that Allah did so. When referring to the future, Muslims frequently qualify any predictions of what will come to pass with the phrase *Insha' Allah*, "If Allah wills."

If predestined orienteering freaks you out, you could try a Karma map. Karma is a Sanskrit word meaning 'action' and is a feature of some aspects of both Buddhism and Hinduism. It operates in the universe as the continuous chain reaction of cause and effect, not only in the physical sense but with moral implications too. "A good cause, a good effect; a bad cause, a bad effect" is a common saying. Apparently human beings are constantly giving off physical and spiritual forces in all directions and the common law of conservation of energy states that no energy is ever lost, it only changes form. Similarly, spiritual and mental action is never lost, it is transformed. Karma is the law of the conservation of moral energy and should not be confused with fate - the notion that life is pre-planned by some external power, beyond change. Because we are conscious beings we can be aware of our karma and thus strive to change the course of events. What we are, and hence our life's direction, is entirely dependent on what we think, so the nobility of our character depends on our 'good' thoughts, actions, and words. Degrading thoughts invariably influence us into negative words and actions.



And where are we bound beyond death? Is life mapped out on a circular route, destined to be reincarnated (not necessarily in human form) until we attain perfection? Religious understandings or otherwise abound on this navigation topic and require a world atlas to locate them all. On the one hand it's easy to dismiss reincarnation, as do many within the Abrahamic faiths, but evidence of previous lives reported under hypnosis (for example) should prompt at least a touch of agnosticism here.

For the majority of Christians the next life is still a no-brainer certainty for those who have a New Testament Map (literal edition) spread before them. Here is the ultimate, unique guide to certainty in this life and 'salvation' in the next: a map drawn in blood by a Divine Rescuer, available free of charge to all true believers (and woe betides those who are 'left behind'), though the intellectual and psychological costs of this tempting offer can be tragically exorbitant. Of course, at the other extreme there are also the 'flat earth-life believers' (my term) who are just as certain that this life is all there is, after which we fall off the edge into oblivion.

So where do I think I'm going (apart from an imminent rest in a dark room)? I don't subscribe to any of the above theories but neither do I dismiss them. I have come to accept (no, embrace) the fact that *all* religions, gods, theologies and transcripts are human creations since we *cannot* encompass and describe objectively that sense of 'the other' present in all of us except in tiny, inadequate human terms. I'm sure we're right constantly to try, and life can be enriched and fulfilled as we seek to map out pathways into unknown territories. However, so often we fall into the trap of claiming and worshipping our religious maps as inerrant entities in themselves rather than as pointers to an ultimate (and less comfortable?) life of love and sacrifice.

'Faith means being sure of the things we hope for and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it' (Hebrews 11.1). I like to think I have a faith, but not one based on a map of creedal beliefs and certainties. I don't think I am spiritually alone on my life journey (though I would hesitate to equate any 'spiritual guidance' with a satnav) and am content to believe my life still has ultimate purposes and goals for the now, not the whatever next. I may be a lousy map reader but I will continue to do my best to read and follow the signs, all the way from Alpha to Omega (and back).

Mapping the Territory of Jesus' Life

Sue Liddell

There is quite a vogue for writing fictional works including real historical characters – Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell; Andrew Motion's John Keats; Benjamin Markovits' Lord Byron; and several featuring Dobbs and Gillies, the first World War facial reconstructionists. These indulge our liking for background information/gossip/personal relationship, but they also give us different thoughts and perspectives from those produced by 'history' books.



I am not writing a literary critical review; and literary expertise and overall readability may not, in all cases, be successful, but such novels do give point to the ideas of Korzybski who thought that people do not have access to direct knowledge of reality; rather they have access to

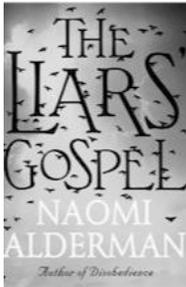
perceptions and to a set of beliefs which human society has confused with direct knowledge of reality. He is remembered as the author of the dictum: 'The map is not the territory'.

It is not surprising that novelists have turned their skills to writing about Jesus, because his life story is one that we tend to access through perceptions and beliefs – and this, I think, has been the case almost from the day he died, if not before then! And his life story has been so central to social, cultural and religious life that the urge to delve further, deeper and wider into it is understandable.

Over a number of years, I have read several such novels. None of the authors is a practising Christian, in fact one is Jewish; but all five have turned their gaze on Jesus and seen in him, and those around him, material to make us question and reflect on our perceptions and beliefs about Jesus, about faith, about the Church, and about God, as we have filtered them through the gospels. Sometimes our perceptions and our languages actually mislead us as to the ‘facts’ with which we must deal – a situation faced by the original gospel writers.

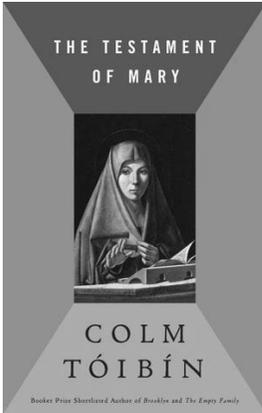
So these modern authors redirect us as to the 'facts' – 'facts' already redirected. No wonder it can be difficult to read their works in as straightforward a way as more usual fiction for, especially as a Christian, one is constantly comparing and contrasting with the gospel accounts; adapting, rejecting, accepting, questioning.

But this is no bad thing, for it leads one to consider again the content and context of the gospels and their messages; and to become aware that others have wondered about them, and about their spinoffs - for instance, the hymns and carols we sing.



The Liars' Gospel by the Jewish writer, Naomi Alderman, shows a young Jesus who is by no means 'meek and mild', nor 'obedient', but who argues aggressively with his father, Joseph. A Jesus who, through Miryam's [Mary's] eyes, is a difficult son, rejecting his mother and getting himself killed; a Jesus who is just another Jewish man for both Caiaphas and Barabbas, facing up the authorities but not cunning enough to escape death; a Jesus who, through the eyes of his friend, Judas, becomes smitten with the idea of being a Messiah and has to be prevented from continuing with that idea. What Judas does not expect is that the authorities will put Jesus to death; no one in the novel thinks Jesus is the Messiah, but the authorities think he is a threat to public order. Early in the novel,

Jesus is described as “a traitor, a rabble leader, a rebel, a liar and a pretender to the throne”. So are the gospels creating a 'gentile' Messiah after the event? Do we tend to discount his Jewishness? Is Jesus more of a fallible human being than we like to think?

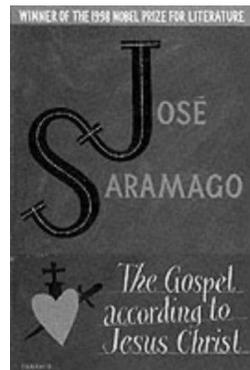


Colm Toibin also ponders on this possibility in his *The Testament of Mary*, in which Mary is 'guarded' and intimidated by the disciples, who are anxious for stories about Jesus that they can weave into the good news narrative. There is the suggestion that they may even dispose of Mary, as it will be easier for them to say what they want about Jesus when she is dead. Again we are being asked to think about the reasoning behind the gospels, to ponder on the authenticity of their narratives

and to acknowledge that we, too, often question the map they draw for us, feeling that there is more to the territory than they present.

The Gospel according to Jesus Christ by the Portuguese writer, Jose Saramago, and Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, discuss the issues more from the inner thoughts and outer behaviour of Jesus himself.

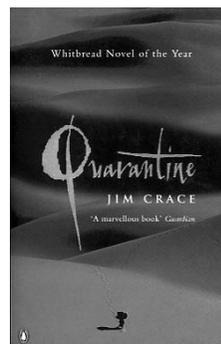
Saramago asks: Is it possible that he was driven as much by the Devil as by God? Is God himself something of a megalomaniac as he lays out for Jesus the path to follow so that God can move on from “the last four thousand years I have been the God of the Jews, a quarrelsome and difficult race by nature ... to spread My word, to help Me become the god of more people”. And is He to blame for all the ills and evil of the Church's history?



PHILIP PULLMAN THE GOOD MAN JESUS AND THE SCOUNDREL CHRIST

Or, as Pullman speculates, has the story of Jesus been engineered from the beginning – as all writers, especially novelists, engineer their stories – leaving us with the paradox of how Jesus' message can survive unless it is couched in the language of miracle and power? Does the visionary, generous, radical “good man” Jesus become stage managed by the more fearful, self righteous, magic-loving “scoundrel Christ” into dying and being 'resurrected' so that he will not be forgotten and the Church can be created? What are Jesus' motivations? And is speculation on them fruitful and worthwhile?

Of the five books, *Quarantine*, by Jim Crace, finds point in the speculation. The story of Jesus in the wilderness, so often used at the beginning of Lent, becomes the story of Jesus starving to death in the desert - but not before he has had an effect on a cruel and money grabbing trader. Musa thinks Jesus has cured him of a fever and, even as the other pilgrims in the desert are burying the body, he thinks he sees a resurrected Jesus – and decides he will become a 'trader' of good news.



Imp of storytelling

Crace, an agnostic at the start of writing and an atheist by the end, was told that the Holy Ghost must have been standing by his shoulder to have created that ending; his reply was that it was not the Holy Ghost but the Imp of Storytelling.

Later, he went on to write, apropos the composition of the book, “I no longer use the term agnostic as a shield. I present my atheism as something richer than just the bleak and heartless absence of belief.... A universe which is an outside job, inflicted on us by a creator in seven days, is a lesser marvel than a universe which is an inside job, the slow painstaking product of natural forces. Evolution is a greater wonder than all the gods... In squaring up to the blessed and perplexing mysteries of life we must show how human consciousness can be ecstatic and deeply spiritual without the vulgar sentimental comforts of a god... Atheists could prove to be the new mystics for the new millennium.”

All five books have elements of the Holy Ghost and the Imp of Storytelling; and all show sincere and thoughtful considerations about the nature and meaning of the life of Jesus. All use as their base material the gospel narratives, but extract from them a variety of possibilities, questions, thoughts, fictional stories, historical speculations and discussions’ that I found disturbing, fascinating, stimulating and thought-provoking. They represent the new growing out of the familiar – the territory extending way beyond the map of those first four books of the New Testament.

The books are:

The Gospel according to Jesus Christ – Jose Saramago 1991

Quarantine – Jim Crace 1997 [the title comes from the Hill of Quarantine/ Mount of the Temptation in Israel/Palestine]

The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ - Philip Pullman 2010

The Liars’ Gospel - Naomi Alderman 2012

The Testament of Mary - Colm Toibin 2012



A few years ago I was invited to be part of a retreat at Launde Abbey in Leicestershire, the basic theme being ‘On The Edge’. Early on we met individually with the retreat facilitator and in my session I said that I had a picture of a sign in my mind, a sign that read ‘Way Out’, and I wasn’t sure if I simply wanted away from the retreat or if it signified something deeper. Then I remembered driving in Cyprus in 2001 and being entranced that the motorway exit signs read ‘Exodus’, and my underlying theme for the retreat was settled. Exodus, the ‘way out’ for the people of Israel was initially to the wilderness, a time of wandering that, despite an occasional wish to return to Egypt, was to lead to positive outcomes, not least a new understanding of the God they worshipped.

I reflected on the stages of Israel’s journey:

1. Slavery in Egypt
2. Exodus
3. Wilderness wandering
4. Promised Land

Stage 3, I pondered, was necessary to understand and appreciate the meaning of stage 4.

The same could be said of the stages of Jesus’ adult life:

1. Time in Nazareth, possibly as a follower of John the Baptist
2. Baptism – was this his ‘Exodus’?
3. Time in the wilderness
4. Ministry

And again, stage 3 was necessary to understand stage 4.

So my thinking during and after the retreat began to understand wilderness as having at least the possibility of being a positive place. It could be a place for:

Preparation

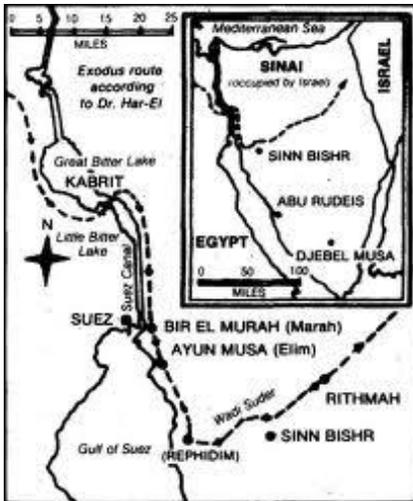
Focus

Awareness of God

Understanding – a place of liberation from old ideas of place and possession

And yes, a place of temptation – temptation to go back to old ways, to compromise with the world, a wanting to ‘go back to Egypt’.

Eventual return to a new way of being, both individually and as church.



My own Exodus since that retreat has been a move away from traditional church; after fifty years it seemed right last year finally to stop leading worship. My spiritual sustenance comes from what might be described as ‘wilderness groups’, small groups of people who are on the edge of or outside church communities, but who are supportive of and committed to each other. I could describe them as ‘*Giving-an-A* communities’, a definition that

comes from the American musician, Ben Zander. In his wonderful book, *The Art of Possibility*, he tells of the time when he was concerned that his students’ worries about end of year grades were affecting their musical performances.

He came up with the idea of telling the students they would all get an ‘A’. And he would tell them right at the start of the course rather than at the end. All he asked the students to do was to write him a letter very early on, but dated at the end of the course, which began “I got my A because...”

He tells the story of a Taiwanese student who, a few weeks after he had written his letter, was asked what difference it had made. “In Taiwan”, the student explained, “I was number 68 out of 70 students. I come to Boston and Mr Zander says I am an A. Very confusing. I walk about, three weeks, very confused. I am number 68, but Mr Zander says I am an A student.... One day I discover I am much happier as an A than as number 68. So I decide I am an A.”

And I wondered if that is what God says to us.

A

In God’s eyes are we all A’s? Maybe we are not miserable sinners in need of redemption. Maybe we are A’s who are loved and cherished by God.

So if we know that in God’s eyes we are an A, what would we put in a letter to God that begins “I got an A because.....” Might it be by defining ourselves by what we are and what we do, rather than by what we believe or what we don’t do?

This God who we see in Jesus, this wonderful God, rates every last one of us as an A. And if God rates us an A – how can we do anything different?

Strange where reflecting on the idea of wilderness can lead!

And what do we do when we come out the wilderness? Perhaps we become communities dedicated to the vision of Isaiah 65:17–25 (what might be described as not so much the most that is pleasing to God, but the least that is acceptable to God), committed to being followers of Jesus rather than believers about him.

Maybe we could take, as our aim, words from the Greek philosopher Aeschylus, whom Robert Kennedy quoted in a speech just after Martin Luther King's assassination:

"Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: 'to tame the savageness of man (sic) and to make gentle the life of this world.'"

I'm an enthusiast for the television series 'The West Wing' – politics as we wish it was – and in one episode a character quotes the American anthropologist Margaret Mead; "*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has*". Come into the wilderness to reflect on how such change might come about, and then come out the wilderness.....

Your details

Your copy of *Briefing* is posted to you three times a year by Sue Liddell. Sue would be glad to have confirmation of the details of your address and the correct spelling of your name, as some copies are returned to her each time, and some copies don't arrive. It would also be helpful to have your email address and phone number so that the Free to Believe data base can be updated. If you would like to stop receiving *Briefing*, or would be happy to receive it online instead of by post, that would also be useful knowledge. If you know of anyone who used to receive *Briefing*, but has now moved or died, would you be good enough to let Sue know? She can be contacted by post at 4 High Green, Leiston, IP16 4ET, and by email at: codurham@btinternet.com

Parables and Stories



Ceci n'est pas un éléphant

(The Belgian surrealist artist, René Magritte, painted a number of pictures captioned 'Ceci n'est pas ...', the most famous of which, perhaps, is 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'. Magritte was making the obvious point that a painting or photograph is an *image* of what it represents. Of his pipe painting, he said "Just try to fill it with tobacco". This is another way of saying "the map is not the territory". So this photograph is *not* an elephant ...)

A Jain version of the story of the Blind Men and the Elephant (which originated in India, and also appears in Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi lore) says that six blind men were asked to determine what an elephant looked like by feeling different parts of the elephant's body. The blind man who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar; the one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope; the one who feels the trunk says the elephant is like a tree branch; the one who feels the ear says the elephant is like a hand fan; the one who feels the belly says the elephant is like a wall; and the one who feels the tusk says the elephant is like a solid pipe.

A king explains to them: 'All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently is because each one of you touched the different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all the features you mentioned.'

The story is used to illustrate the principle of living in harmony with people who have different belief systems, and it also tells us that truth can be stated in different ways.

The following are re-tellings of two stories that appear in Anthony de Mello's *The Song of the Bird* (pub. Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand Press, India):

The Devil and his Friend

The devil went for a walk with a friend. A man ahead of them stooped to pick up something from the pathway.

‘What did the man find?’ asked the friend.

The devil replied, ‘A piece of the truth.’

‘Aren't you worried about that?’ asked the friend.

‘Not at all,’ said the devil. ‘Just watch and wait, and he will make a religious belief out of it.’

The Explorer

In the early days of world travel, an explorer returned from the Amazon to his people. They wanted to know all about this new territory. But how could he put into words the experience of seeing breathtakingly beautiful flowers and birds, or of hearing the sounds of the forest at night? How could he communicate what he felt in his heart when he saw the animals of the rain forest, or paddled his canoe over rapids in the river?

He said, ‘Go and find out for yourselves. There's no substitute for personal experience, personal risk-taking.’ But to guide them, he drew a map of the Amazon.

They seized on the map. They each made copies of it. They framed and hung the original in their town hall. Everyone considered himself an expert on the Amazon now, for every turn and bend of the river was known, its breadth and depth were discussed, the location of the rapids and waterfalls were noted. But no one ventured there and, over time, some of the original details became distorted.

The explorer lived to regret that map. It would have been better had he drawn nothing at all.

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A cat’s map of the bed, from the collection of religious and other humour from All-Creatures.org

<http://www.all-creatures.org/humor/cat-map.html>

