

When Graham Sutherland, the eminent British artist was asked to design the great tapestry for the new post-war cathedral at Coventry, he discussed at some length with others the representational imagery he wanted to use. From his sketchbooks it can be seen that his imagination was expansive. He wanted, he said, to relate his figure to the contemporary world, something which artists- in wood, stone and words- have been doing ever since they began to depict Christ at all. Sutherland, in the post-war period, felt “the need for a tragic and sombre Christ”, but on the other hand, he wanted to present “a figure of great contained vitality”, having “something of the power of lightning and thunder, of rocks, of the mystery of creation generally”.(1)

John the Evangelist, aimed at nothing less than Graham Sutherland, by appealing to our imaginations, and using words and images for his Christ figure to reveal and conceal the true and living God. In fact he used a multiplicity of images: from the Logos, The Word made flesh, Son of God, Son of Man, the Vine, the Light of the world, the Bread of Life, the Messiah, and the Good Shepherd: all of these images exploring Jesus as the self expression and self-communication of the Living God. And John, like Graham Sutherland, and like any artist, knew how “every work of art is by nature incomplete, only half-created, until it is finished by the beholder’s” response. John doesn’t want us to believe what others say about “this man”: there’s nothing second-hand about the Jesus John offers us. John doesn’t want us to think that believing is subscribing to a set of propositions or doctrines. He isn’t so interested in what might be called “outside” kind of truth, the kind of truth that simply gives us information, but “inside” kind of truth, which is bit more slippery, the kind of truth that we can’t easily pin down, the kind of truth that not only speaks the truth of God, but our truth as well, the kind of truth that changes us, or transforms us, and allows me to say not only “I believe” but “I am”. John is concerned with the truth of this man, but not at the expense of “our truth”. John wants his “work of art”, his gospel, completed in our response. John is offering us a way of being in the world where we can become fully alive and fully human. John is writing with intent so that we might wake up, discover in the energy of recognition, that living white-hot “moment of grace” or “event of the Spirit”- like when Jesus speaks Mary Magdalene’s “early morning name”, or when Thomas gives up his attachment to how God should be and faces, in his wounded God, his own wounds, or when the disciples in the upper room experience the breath of the Risen Jesus despite the locked doors of their fear and unbelief: what Ronald Knox famously describes as when “walls become windows”! (2)

John- in his Gospel- offers us first of all a language for faith; John is reaching for “another way of being: another way of knowing” (Michael Leunig), which at least in part explains the unbelief of the Jewish authorities. John is able, in quite dramatic style, to set his Jesus in the context of controversy and dispute: his opponents serve as a foil for John to explore the true meaning of belief and commitment. For John, believing is more a verb than a noun: more dynamic than static. not so much believing “in” something, but believing “into” a whole new way of knowing and living. To believe for John is a fundamental disposition of openness to what is, a willingness and a readiness to see what is truly there in front of us, a fidelity to one’s experience no matter what it is.(3) This “selfless attention” to the word or the picture or the person in front of me opens me up to, (in a phrase of Michael Leunig’s), to the “small shy truth” that is waiting to emerge. In John’s terms, this becomes possible for the kind of person who does not seek her own glory, someone who we might call today “full of themselves” This is the kind of person who is open towards an expanding horizon of possibility, who is tractable and teachable. Against this way of being John graphically contrasts the religious leaders who refuse to be open, who remain closed, shut off, shut down: the ones who, according to John, remain in their sin, the ones who claim to see, when they cannot.

Into this hostile environment the Good Shepherd speaks of his most abiding and true characteristic:” I know my own and my own know me”. Here Jesus offers the truth about

ourselves, the truth of our being-in-relation.: This is our truth, and it is also God's truth. This "man for others" opens up for us a way forward, which is always "the way to someone else" This "good shepherd" looks at people in the eye: women and men, Jews, Samaritans, Greeks, Romans, the learned and ignorant, friendly and hostile: this man is about making friends. This man, right at the beginning of John's Gospel, when John's disciples asked Jesus where he was staying were told: "come and see" What John is wanting us to see- in Jesus' engagement with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, and the man beside the pool for 38 years, and the blind man, and Mary and Martha, and Lazarus is this man's pattern of relating, his pattern of meeting with people as though they mattered. Even, Jesus says, those other sheep who do not belong to this fold "I will bring them also" and "they will listen to my voice" and "there will be one flock, one shepherd" The Good Shepherd is a powerful image of the befriending God, the one who initiates and searches until we are found. Love, according to the Good Shepherd, always brings together: the Good Shepherd who sees no distinction between being in relationship with God and with each other. It is the true marriage of opposites which the wedding at Cana celebrates: wine and water, darkness and light, male and female, Samaritan and Jew, Christian and Muslim, friend and stranger and even enemy. This man crossed social barriers, was deeply concerned with the marginalized, critiqued and challenged patterns of behaviour and social conventions, offering a vision of a common humanity focused on personal relationships. John is in no doubt: this pattern of living is simply what we call love, treating the other as real, imagining what it's like to be the "other" person so as to fully engage and identify with them, creating inner space within himself for every possible encounter. The test of the genuineness of the kind of faith Jesus calls us into to lies in our capacity for difference and otherness.

If John is speaking a new language for faith and believing, and showing us the truth about ourselves as being-in-relation, then he is also offering us a way to life.

This is the Good Shepherd who came "that they may have life, life lived to the full". If believing is believing into, then Jesus is asking us very clearly to pay attention to what kind of God it is who draws us to Himself. For it matters what kind of God you have, for if it is a false God, then it would be better to be an atheist! The God Jesus relates to, the God who sends Jesus, the God Jesus is intimate with is none other than the Source of life itself, the true God who loves and gives life. John is unequivocal: this man, the Son of Man,, the man for others, is where we will find life Here is the great divide, between those who will die in their sins, who will refuse the offer of life, remain stuck in their "living death", and those who will be open enough to respond to the offer of a "dying life". This Good Shepherd lays his life down for the sheep. He lays it down in order to take it up again. And this Shepherd speaks directly out of his own lived experience into ours. John is asking us to consider this man's integrity, his goodness, and the cost of it all. He speaks to us of this man's inner freedom, his lived obedience, living out the truth of God, revealing the real power of God in the weakness of love, and the real wisdom of God in apparent foolishness."

The language for faith; the truth of our being-in-relation; and the way to life: all of this offered freely to us by one who practiced love, and asks us to do the same.. Graham Sutherland was surely right: he wanted "this man", the Word made flesh, to be "a figure of great contained vitality" who spoke into our contemporary world. He did not want to ignore the twentieth century's terrible evils; nor did he want to ignore the Word's majesty and glory. John did no less 20 odd centuries before, grappling with this figure of a man 'with something of the "power of lightning...and the mystery of creation" about him, who girds himself with a towel and washes his friends feet, and still speaks into our world and our lives.

For the walls of our fear, unbelief, and anxiety to become windows we will need an imaginative jolt: nothing less in fact than falling in love with love. We will have to make

room in our hearts for an altogether new way of knowing and being. This is not something that we can work out in our heads, it has to be shown us: revealed. This man", who will not let us simply believe up in our heads, who insists that truth is not "out there" but self-involving, always "in here", who forges a new way of being and relating such that we can believe into a new way of saying I am, with both freedom and authority, "this man", Jesus the Christ, the Good Shepherd, the Word made flesh, the self communication and self expression of the Source of Life itself, asks us to practise this same self-emptying, self-giving love, making the exodus or journey from self to the other.

John's Gospel is all about personal relations. Jesus looks into people's eyes as though they matter, asking them to "come and see" and spend time with him. Love is "this man's" meaning: giving and receiving, practising and practised love, pointing always to our inner truth where we find ourselves and flourish by giving ourselves away. This love always comes at the cost of a "dying life": but it is an attractive love which turns our walls into windows so that at last we fall in love with love, discovering that love alone has the capacity to seduce us into practising this same love.

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Good Shepherd Sunday

Holy Covenant Church, Canberra

The opening story about Graham Sutherland, and further penetrating insights into John's Gospel as a work of art written to be finished by the beholder's response is from Alan Ecclestone's *Scaffolding of Spirit*, DLT, London, 1987.

Rowan Williams, in his Easter sermon this year, quoted Ronald Knox's wonderful image of walls becoming windows.

The understanding of Faith as openness, and the opposite of faith being the closed mind comes from Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, Crossroad, NY, 1999.