AMROZI AND LUKE’S GOSPEL

A Possibility for Dialogue

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IT IS A SATURDAY afternoon in August, and I am thinking about a passage in Luke’s Gospel that will be proclaimed on the last Sunday in November, the first Sunday in Advent. The passage from Lk 21 is a challenge to understand and difficult to preach about. It is from what is described as the ‘apocalyptic’ chapter of Luke’s Gospel:

• Cosmic signs will appear in the heavens;
• Distress will be on the earth;
• ‘People will faint from fear and foreboding for what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken’ (NRSV, Lk 21:26);
• The ‘Son of Man’ will appear in power and glory.
• Gospel hearers are encouraged to ‘stand up,’ ‘raise your hands,’ ‘be on guard,’ ‘be alert’.

The passage is perplexing for the contemporary reader unfamiliar with this style of literary genre. Therefore, it tends to be read literally with readers thinking that God is revealing a mysterious plan of dire consequences that has cataclysmic implications for all who live. It would not be unimaginable for readers to feel a little apprehensive or uneasy about what the passage might be saying about the world, God and their own readiness for that unexpected divine encounter, usually in death. It is possible that the proclamation of the Gospel on the First Sunday of Advent might leave people with an overwhelming sense of spiritual depression—the exact opposite to what the original writer intended.

Apart from the preaching challenge of this Advent text, something else concerns me today.

During the past week media attention has been focused on Bali’s District Court in Denpasar and the protracted judicial deliberation of the court case against Amrozi bin Nurhasyim, one of the perpetrators of the Bali bombing. Finally the judgment comes, along with its predictable sentence. Amrozi is declared guilty and will be executed by firing squad. In Australia, at least as it is reported in the media, the overwhelming response is one of delight.

• ‘I’m shaking...I’m so happy.’ (The Age, 7th August, p.7)
• ‘After all this time I finally got it back for Anthony...’ (The Age, 7th August, p.7)
• ‘I could not have wished for any other decision...’ (The Age, 7th August, p.7)
• ‘I hope he suffers. I hate the smile. It’s sickening’ (The Age, 7th August, p.7)
• ‘Now I’ve won. This time I’ve won. Sucked in, you b........Now I’m going to have a beer for my sisters.’ (The Advertiser, 8th August, p.7)
• ‘If you take an innocent life like that, you shouldn’t be on this earth.’ (The Advertiser, 8th August, p.7)
• ‘I’m ecstatic. The smiling assassin smiles no more.’ (The Advertiser, 8th August, p.7)

I think I understand what lies behind these reactions, especially from those hurt at Bali or who grieve the death of loved ones. There is one comment that stands apart from the others. It comes from an Adelaide magistrate: ‘I don’t believe in the death penalty. And I would hate to think that somebody’s life was going to be taken in my son’s name.’ (The Age, 7th August, p.7) But the vehemence and vindic-
tiveness of the rest still surprise me.

How do I bring these two worlds together—a perplexing ancient text from the first century CE intended to nurture the Christian community as it prepares to celebrate Christmas, and the intense vehemence of people’s vengeful anger? In other words, how can the world in which I live engage the Bible? Are these two worlds forever destined to remain separate, and the biblical text unable to illuminate what goes on around me? Can Luke’s Advent text and angry vindictiveness expressed towards a condemned criminal speak to each other? Or am I forced to adopt a style of biblical interpretation common among many Christians, where the text is literally and rigorously interpreted and rigorously applied?

I would like to suggest a solution to this dilemma through an approach to biblical reading and interpretation called ‘intertextuality.’ This approach honours the world of the Bible and my own Bali-related world. It differs from a more conventional or classical approach that focuses on the meaning intended by the biblical writer, in so far as this can be discerned. First, though, I want to consider the nature of a biblical text.

**The Nature of the Biblical Text**

The Bible was never intended for a Western third millennium CE English-speaking audience. The collections of writings that compose the Bible are not contemporary, but come from a world and time different from our own. They encapsulate the insights and beliefs of their authors about God’s action among the people of Israel (First Testament) and Jesus’ proclamation of God’s presence expressed through the community of his disciples (Second Testament). These writings cannot be seen as attempts to offer an historically accurate recording about Jesus and his disciples. They are historically located, culturally conditioned and geographically limited writings expressing the faith insights about God and Jesus intended for a particular audience.

As these writings were known to nourish the lives of their original audience, they became regarded as ‘Scripture’, collected together, preserved, constantly proclaimed, prayed over, and reflected upon. Since then, communities of faith in every generation have been convinced that these texts are eternally relevant. Considered sacred by people of faith, they can speak to people of faith, even today. Though the Bible’s writings are not contemporaneous with us, nevertheless, they can address the Bali-focused and concerned world that I experience this week. Care and sensitivity is, however, needed in reading the Bible.

‘Literalism’

One approach to reading the Bible, common today, sees the biblical text as a factual recording of events involving ancient Israel or Jesus. A literal interpretation of biblical stories, what I am calling ‘literalism,’ reads these stories without attention to their literary placement in the overall narrative schema of the biblical work in which they occur. They are not read, either, with sensitivity to the cultural and social world from which they came, or with a desire to seek the author’s intention in writing. In fact, literalism violates the writers’ original intent. In addition, a literalist or fundamentalist reading does not allow the interpreter to appreciate the radical nature of these texts in their original setting.

The interpretation of the Bible derived from this naïve approach becomes equated with God’s Word, being eternally and uncon-
ditionally true. Because the actual biblical text is regarded literally as God's Word, then its understanding must be clear and plain. The 'truth' that emerges from the interpreter's understanding of the 'plain truth' contained in the Bible becomes unquestionable. To it everything else must be subservient as this biblical 'truth' judges everything else. The movement is one way—from the Bible to the world, and the world must conform to what is revealed through the Bible, God's Word. Thus, my present cultural situation or experience must conform to the literal truth of the Bible. Here there is no room for dialogue, or for me to bring the questions and situation posed in my world to illuminate the biblical text under consideration. Monologue rather than dialogue is central.

So, to the situation that I am considering, Luke's text is seen as describing literally the events that will occur at the end of time: There will be a cosmic upheaval and national turmoil—of which the present international terrorist scenario is proof. This only strengthens the case for the imminence of Jesus' second coming which will bring judgment to evildoers and justice to those who have been victimized. In this interpretation, what will happen to Amrozi is only a reinforcement of the truth confirmed in Luke's text. His execution could be interpreted, then, as a divine act, in accord with God's truth revealed through a literalist reading of the Gospel. In this interpretation, it is conceivable that the most appropriate response for a Christian would be one of ecstatic joy—God's will was being done!

'Intertextuality'

A second approach to biblical interpretation, the intertextual approach considers two worlds as 'texts': the world of the biblical text, and the 'cultural text' of my present experience. Each of these worlds is like a tapestry or weaving ('textere' in Latin is 'to weave'). Each reflects its unique cultural, social and interior dynamic or 'weaving.' This is expressed either in the writing itself (the Biblical text) or the questions and insights about the present (the 'cultural text'). Both worlds take seriously the Bible as a particular expression of God's self-communication to human beings along with the contemporary world. In other words, the contemporary world is also seen as an arena of God's revelation.

A consideration of the Bible and culture as 'texts' raises the possibility of an intertextual conversation, in which each text moves backwards and forwards, allowing one to speak to and elucidate the other. Both texts become important. The dialogue that these texts are capable of creating through the reader or interpreter is different from the monologue of the literalist approach. In that approach the reader or interpreter moves from the Bible and applies the gleaned biblical truth to the present situation making it conform to God's interpreted Word. In intertextuality, the interpreter moves to and fro dialogically between two arenas of God's self-expression and communication as experienced by human beings, in history and culture.

As I bring the 'text' of my world, with its questions and experiences to the sacred texts and engage intentionally in this 'intertextual' conversation, there are two aspects that must be considered. These are the 'inner play' and 'outer play' of the biblical text. Both have been systematically developed by Julia Kristeva in consideration of literature in general, but can be fruitfully applied to biblical interpretation. Inner play focuses on the biblical text and highlights the internal narrative forces that give meaning and power to the biblical story. It allows the reader to consider the narrative clues evident in the biblical narrative and confirmed by the overall literary framework and thematic development of the writing. The complexity of internal literary, rhetorical and thematic forces of the story, the inner play, expresses the authorial intent and communicates to the reader. The inner play is the dynamic operating in the Advent Gospel selected from Luke's Gospel, the relationship of this passage to the
overall literary dynamic in the whole Gospel, and the rhetorical argument framed by its author within the cultural and social context of the text’s original audience.

*Outer play* attends to the contemporary context in which the biblical narrative is proclaimed and heard. The reader’s outer world is brought into a fruitful symbiotic relationship with the biblical text. An identification and articulation of this personal world of the reader’s context is like another ‘voice’ of the reader. This subjective voice articulates what is important for the reader and provides that voice which will converse with the story. This is the outer play. It is the inter-relational dynamic established between the biblical text and reader. It allows the possibility for the voice of Gospel texts, from a time and culture different from our own, to speak to our world, and the voice of our world to pose the questions and bring a perspective in reading these texts. Both texts, the biblical text and the cultural text, through their respective “voices” can speak to each other.

Even to propose the possibility of an outer play, of an inter-textual or inter-vocal conversation, is to shift the emphasis in classical biblical interpretation away from the search for the mysterious, ever-elusive ‘objective’ meaning of the text. This is the meaning to which only scholars have access, for only they have learned the techniques to crack open the meaning contained in the biblical texts. Sometimes this meaning is identified with the author’s intention, and the art of the biblical interpreter was to define this intent demonstrated or reinforced in the writer’s work. Once authorial intention was identified a timeless, ‘objective’ interpretation of the biblical text could be proposed. This approach also led to ‘proof-texting’ where Bible texts are used to prove current church positions.

*‘Inner play’ and ‘Outer Play’ in Practice*

Let me return to the dilemma with which I began this essay, and the intertextual conversation possible between the events that surround Bali and Luke’s Advent text. An intertextual conversation employing the techniques of inner and outer play allows a meaningful dialogue to occur.

An *inner play* with Luke’s text reveals that the evangelist is writing to a community seeking assurance in a time of cultural and social upheaval. The powers of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world in the late first century CE, when Luke was penning the Gospel, were asserting themselves in ways that caught Christian communities off guard. Confidence in the imminence of Jesus’ second coming was waning; so too in the pastoral, liturgical and ministerial leadership. Luke’s Gospel was written to offer hope and confidence to Christian disciples living two to three generations after the events of Jesus and his first disciples.

Lk 21, from which the Gospel for the Sunday of Advent is taken, can be read against this backdrop. The writer employs an apocalyptic style of writing, familiar to the world of the Gospel’s audience, to reassert that world history is ultimately in God’s hands and that Jesus will definitively come to liberate faithful disciples who suffer. For this reason the evangelist urges them to ‘stand up with raised heads’ (21:28). They are to have hope, not despair, for their future. In the final section of Luke’s Advent text, the writer urges them to be spiritually alert to what is happening around them, not to be dull-hearted, dissipated or worried (21:34f). Instinctively, without burying their heads in the sand, they must be ‘alert at all times.’

What Luke addresses in these powerful verses is intended for a Greco-Roman audience. It is encouragement for a time when all in the world seems to be going wrong and the innocent unjustly suffering. It is Luke’s response to the ultimate question about the presence of God in times of difficulty.

In the *outer play* with Luke’s text I reflect on the reactions to the Amrozi sentence. Behind the vehemence of the many reactions is the desire for justice for innocent victims of
suffering and death. At their center, as I draw these reactions into dialogue with Luke’s text and world, two things mesh together. Both ‘texts’ are concerned about a world in which so much seems to have gone wrong. Innocence and goodness, rather than being sources of virtue that are encouraged, become the targets of violence. Our word today is ‘terrorism’ and much is associated with it.


From the point of view of my world and its responses, the vehement words applauding Amrozi’s death sentence reflect something deeper than simply the desire for revenge. They express the fundamental realization of the fragility of human existence and the inability to secure what could be expressed in theological terms as ‘self-salvation’. They are triggered by deep personal turmoil and confusion, and a passionate conviction that injustice needs to be addressed. Despite our best military hardware and intelligence surveillance, we cannot control what happens around us, to us, or even inside ourselves. We are subject to the violence of terrorists and the common cold. The extreme reaction to Amrozi is a stifled cry for a saviour.

With these reflections in mind, I return to Luke’s world. I allow these insights to dialogue with Luke’s text. Luke, too, is concerned about the sense of turmoil and confusion experienced by the Gospel’s audience. The desire to reflect on this experience in the light of the truth of God’s presence revealed in Jesus shapes the inner play of this apocalyptic chapter. Luke asserts here that God will address violence and evil ultimately, and that history is in God’s hands. This conviction should bring confidence in the midst of a violent present. It should encourage a community of disciples — not to violent vindictiveness, nor passive aggression — but to a confident and alert meditation on divine possibilities.

Whether those of us living in Australia after the events of Bali can agree with Luke’s insights is another question. In a sense this doesn’t matter. It creates the next moment of the intertextual dialogue. Our reactions to this inner play become the next aspect of the outer play between the text of Luke’s Advent Gospel and the delighted reactions to Amrozi’s death sentence. The conversation between Luke’s world and our own is always ongoing.

FURTHER READING


