



Treasures old and new: Some theology for scribes

- A theological reflection by Simon Taylor - Director of Ministry, Diocese of Bristol

“Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new” – Matthew 13.52

1. This paper offers some theological material to inform the values discerned in the Transforming Church Together (TCT) process. In addition, I have tried to keep an eye to the emerging priorities. The material is largely biblical, but without being exclusively so.
2. This material is both incomplete and fragmentary. In places, the fragments may cut against one another. I am reassured by Duncan Forrester’s comment that “A theologian should not ... be ashamed of offering in public debate ‘fragments’ of insight”¹ as these can reveal practices and ideologies obscured by more systematic approaches and are true to the Pauline insight that “now we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13.12). There is more treasure yet that others will bring out of their stores.

A. Openness: We are loving and open to all.

3. The image of a door that opens (and conversely, shuts) is found in many places in Scripture.
 - a. To the lukewarm church in Laodicea, St John the Divine, speaks of Jesus standing at a door and knocking. “If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me” (Rev. 3.20). Holman Hunt’s painting of this scene famously had no handle on the outside of the door. “The door of the human heart can only be opened from the inside,” was the painter’s explanation.
 - b. A little earlier, the church in Philadelphia is urged to persevere in the face of suffering with these words: “These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens: ‘I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut’” (Rev. 3.7-8).
 - c. In John’s Gospel, Jesus declares “I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am

¹ Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 202.

the gate, whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture ... I am come that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10.7-10). In the Sermon on the Mount, we also have Jesus telling his hearers that God is only too willing to give good gifts to those who ask, using the same imagery of the opening door: “knock and the door will be opened for you ... for everyone who knocks the door will be opened” (Matthew 7.7-8).

- d. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is led by an angel out of prison. The iron gate of the prison “opened for them of its own accord” (Acts 12.10). There is an ironic warning here – it is only when Peter reaches the house of Mary where the believers are gathered, that the door is not (at least initially) opened to him. The joy of the maid Rhoda leaves Peter outside, until she needs to prove that it is Peter to the believers gathered within (Acts 12.13-16).
 - e. There are some important moments when doors are shut. The five bridesmaids who go to buy some oil return to find “the door was shut”. On asking for the door to be opened, they are told “I do not know you” (Matthew 25.10-12). The bridesmaids are dismissed as foolish, and Jesus’ hearers are told to “keep awake ... for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25. 13). This parable is a warning is for those already in the house. We who call ourselves Christians need to be prepared to greet Christ whatever the time. Finding the door shut is because of our foolishness, which is our failure to act on what we have heard from Jesus.²
 - f. The biblical image of the door, it seems to me, is helpful to our hope to enable churches to open to their communities. Our value of openness begins with openness to God, who knocks on the door (Rev 3.20). It is God’s power to open and to shut on which we depend (Rev. 3.7-8, Acts 12.10). The door that is Jesus opens to safety, and to salvation. Going in and out of that door is life (John 10) and God will open the door (Matthew 7). We are warned not to shut the door on those who God is bringing into our midst, even for good reasons (Acts 12.13-16). We are to act on what Jesus teaches, lest we find the door closed against us (Matthew 25).
4. Openness also features in the life of Jesus. On a number of occasions, Jesus asks those he encounters “What do you want me to do for you?” (e.g., Luke 18.41). This is not an order; it is an invitation and an offer. Here openness is closely related to vocation. Pope Francis has picked up on the vocational dimension of openness, speaking the way God works through those who are open to God’s will. In particular, he speaks of Mary’s response to the angel as an example of praying “with a heart open to God’s will”. Openness to God begins in prayer – “prayer opens my heart and makes me open to God’s will”.³
 5. Jesus is open to everyone, including and especially those on the margins and those who are looked down on by others. His open approach to table fellowship gained him

² See Matthew 7.24-27: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock ... And everyone who hears these words and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand”. These seem to be the operative definitions of ‘wise’ and ‘foolish’ for Matthew. They are also borne out in the later parables of Matthew 25.

³ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/46627/pope-francis-mary-teaches-us-to-pray-with-a-heart-open-to-gods-will> (accessed 20.11.21.).

criticism from the religious authorities and gatekeepers of the time: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Mark 2.16). This open approach to table fellowship is compounded by the fact that it is rarely or never Jesus’ own table. In Mark 2 he is at Levi’s table; in Luke 19, Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus’ table; in Luke 7, Jesus accepts a place at the table of Simon the Pharisee. A disciple, a ‘sinner’, a religious leader – Jesus sits at all their tables. Even the last supper is held at a borrowed table (Mark 14.14).

6. Are there limits to the openness that we find in the Bible? It would appear not – the scandalous willingness of Jesus to eat with all kinds of people is hard to contradict. And yet there are two occasions when the door will be shut. One is when we do not want to open it (Holman Hunt’s interpretation of Rev. 3.20). The other is when those who are inside are shut out because they have not acted on what they have heard Jesus say (Matt. 25). God’s openness is boundless generosity, but it must be accepted, and it is not to be abused.
7. At the root of this is the openness of Jesus to God, and to human beings. This is seen most clearly in the cross. As the Eucharistic Prayer puts it, “He opened wide his arms for us on the cross”.⁴ It is the openness of God in Christ to us that enables and encourages our openness. It is the openness of the arms of Christ on the cross that undoes the damaged caused by our closed hearts and our attempts to close others out.

B. Generosity: We receive and give sincerely

8. An account of generosity must likewise begin from the generosity of God. This is seen and experienced in creation and in redemption.
9. Creation is above all a free gift. It is not in reaction to anything that God creates the universe – both the Genesis accounts simply state this: “God created the heavens and the earth ... the Lord God made the earth and the heavens” (Gen. 1.1, 2.4). Unlike other ancient near-eastern accounts of creation, there is no conflict out of which creation emerges as a by-product. God’s answer to Job is a series of questions beginning with “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (Job 38.4) and continuing for two chapters asking Job questions about the nature of creation. The force of it all is that Job did not create the earth and cannot control it.
10. Similarly, redemption seen paradigmatically in both the rescue of Israel from slavery in Egypt and in the death and resurrection of Jesus, is a free gift of God. The new Jerusalem, in St John’s vision, comes down out of heaven, a gift from God.
11. Our first response to this is thanksgiving. The Eucharist is a liturgy of thanksgiving (from the Greek ‘*eucharistia*’ meaning ‘thanksgiving’). The first part of the Eucharistic Prayer (the Preface) has, from the very earliest texts that we have, always been a thanksgiving to God for God’s mighty acts in creation and redemption. This is founded on the Jewish practice of blessing and thanking God before eating, and so

⁴ Eucharistic Prayer B (*Common Worship: Service and Prayers for the Church of England*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2000) p. 188). See also the more ambiguous phrase in Prayer G – “... with a love stronger than death he opened wide his arms on the cross” (*Common Worship*, p. 201).

seems likely to have been Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper. In the Eucharist and in every grace said before a meal, we give thanks to God for all that God has done.

12. Our generosity is, therefore, the second response to God's generosity. King David's prayer, which echoes in our liturgies, encapsulates our generosity as both a response to and dependent on the generosity of God: "all things come from you, and of your own have we given you" (1 Chron. 29.14).⁵ St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, urges them to contribute generously to the collection he is making for the Jerusalem church. He speaks of how the Macedonian churches are giving from "their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty" (2 Cor. 8.2). But Paul is also keen to emphasise the mutuality of the collection, "your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality" (2 Cor. 8.14). And all of this is rooted in "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich ... Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" (2 Cor. 8.9, 9.15).
13. The theology of generosity that I am describing is more beautifully expressed in the Prayer of General Thanksgiving in the Book of Common Prayer: "Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men; We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen."
14. Sometimes, like the Corinthians, we lack generosity and need something like Paul's rhetorical strategy of trying to flatter, shame and get us to compete in being generous. At other times, we are more like the disciples in Mark 6 – exhausted, overwhelmed by need, and lacking resources. Crucially what Jesus does in response is not to create new resources, but to take what the disciples have (five loaves and two fish) and offer them to God before giving them to people. Notice that Jesus only asks them "How many loaves have you?" (Mark 6.38). The fish are the disciples' addition. Even faced by overwhelming need and lack, we are to offer what we have. Not all of the hungry of Judea were fed that day, but over 5000 people were fed.
15. In this vein, Sam Wells warns that too much Christian theology and ethics is based on an assumption of scarcity. A scarcity of resources, of wisdom, of revelation, and ultimately a scarcity of God. "In contrast to this assumption of scarcity," writes Wells, "I suggest that God gives enough – everything that his people need."⁶ This does not mean everything we want, or that it will be given in the way that we expect it. Wells goes on to say that God also gives too much (the left-over baskets from the feeding of the 5000). Here the problem is that our imagination is not able to take in all that God has to give. We can fear losing ourselves, being drowned in the tidal wave of God's generosity. Through imagination and community, Wells suggests, the Church

⁵ Cf *Common Worship*, p. 291, which uses the present tense: "of your own do we give you".

⁶ Samuel Wells, *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 6.

is called to find “ways of embodying his grace so that people of all social locations, all abilities, all ages can be transformed without being drowned.”⁷

16. One final note. A possible response to the abundance of God’s generosity is to build barns to store that generosity. Jesus warns against this (Luke 12.16-21). God’s gifts are to be used.

C. Creativity – We co-operate with the work of the Spirit

17. Once again, any theological consideration of this concept must begin with God. The sheer generative nature of creation is immense. Against Babylonian and other contemporaries, the Genesis creation stories emphasise the goodness of creation, with the repeated refrain of “and God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1.9,12,18,21,25,31). Alongside the goodness of creation, Genesis 1 is a witness to the methodical nature of God’s creative power (starting with the most basic elements of light and darkness, and moving to the complexity of living creatures), the ordered way in which God works, the purposive approach, and the end of creation in rest (Gen. 2.2-3). There is utter spontaneity in the sheer gift of creation, and there is an ordered purpose to creation. Later Jewish thought introduced the personified figure of the Wisdom of God to emphasise this sense of the purposive nature of creation. In Proverbs 8, Lady Wisdom speaks: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago ... when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race” (Prov. 8.22,29-31). When Stanley Hauerwas speaks of ‘the grain of the universe’,⁸ he is very close to invoking the figure of Wisdom. The opening of John’s Gospel, the hymn to the Word of God, uses language normally used of Wisdom to speak of the Word and so of Christ.
18. The other thing to note is the sheer abundance of created life. The Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 is a place of abundance and rich diversity. There is a marvellous scene in which God brings each creature in turn before Adam to be named, and for Adam to discern which will be a partner (Gen. 2.18-20). God’s answer to Job asks him about a long list of created things, from the seasons to the stars, from the weather to wildlife, and goes on to ask about the mythical creatures Behemoth and Leviathan (Job 38-41). Recently *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF) notes that “in the story of salvation God brings about a glorious diversity in creation, a diversity that is reflected in humankind”.⁹ The implications of this diversity are, of course, contested. I was taken by Bishop Jo Bailey Wells, speaking in an LLF video, saying that the God who created night and day also created dusk and dawn. The intentional diversity that God has given us in creation is seemingly infinite.
19. Human creativity is not an explicitly Biblical concept. God alone is the creator. Human creativity as a concept is largely introduced into theological consideration

⁷ Wells, *God’s Companions*, p. 7.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology. Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St Andrews in 2001* (London: SCM, 2002). The phrase belongs to John Howard Yoder: “people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe” (John Howard Yoder, ‘Armaments and Eschatology’ *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1.1 (1988), p. 58, cited in Hauerwas, *With the Grain*, p. 17).

⁹ *Living in Love and Faith: Christian Teaching and Learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), p. 188.

from literary sources in the 17th century. In a sermon of 1632, John Donne said that “Poetry is a counterfeit Creation, and makes things that are not, as though they were.” (Of course, Donne was a poet as well as a preacher!) And yet, the creation of Adam, as God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen. 2.7), is literally a story of in-spiration. Adam is God-breathed, so all human beings are inspired. It is important to note that human creativity is itself created.

20. Human creativity is well attested in the biblical record. The tent of meeting in which the people of Israel met with God in the wilderness was made by those who responded to Moses’ very open invitation that “all who are skilful among you shall come and make all that the Lord has commanded ...” (Exodus 35.10). To this open invitation, Moses adds a calling to particular skilled workers. “See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel son of Uri, of the tribe of Judah; he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. And he has inspired him to teach, both him, and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with every kind of skill to do every kind of work done by an artisan or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue, purple, and crimson yarns; and in fine linen, or by a weaver – by any sort of artisan or skilled designer” (Exodus 35.30-35). The Temple, which replaced the tent of meeting, was built by gentile builders (1 Kings 5.18) and overseen by the half-Jewish, half-gentile Hiram of Tyre, who shared his name with the king of Tyre, and who was “full of skill, intelligence and knowledge in working bronze” (1 Kings 7.13-14). The skilled creativity in these projects is open to all and can even go beyond God’s people.
21. Music is also part of the creativity to which the Bible bears witness. Jubal, “the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe” (Genesis 4.21) is one of the descendants of Cain. The skill of musicians is noted on several occasions, including when Saul asks for “someone who can play well” (1 Sam. 16.17) and is sent David. The Psalms urge musicians to “Sing to him a new song; play skilfully on the strings” (Psalm 33.3). Elsewhere, musicians are set aside to lead the worship of God’s people in the house of the Lord, where the ark dwelt before the Temple was built. “They ministered with song before the tabernacle ... and they performed their service in due order” (1 Chron. 6. 32). Music is a ministry and a service. It is also a means of prophesying. Asaph and his sons with Herman and Jeduthun were set apart “to prophesy with lyres, harps and cymbals” (1 Chron. 25.1). Together “they and their kindred, who were trained in singing to the Lord, all of whom were skilful, numbered two hundred and eighty-eight” (1 Chron. 25.7).
22. The books of the Bible themselves offer an example of creativity. The language, imagery, poetry, and teaching is not only important to faith, but part of the artistic corpus of human literature. Jesus’ parables are masterpieces of storytelling. And throughout the Bible, biblical material is used and re-used to bring out fresh emphasis and insight. The Bible is creative with the Bible.
23. Recently Gregory Jones has spoken of “traditioned innovation”, an approach to leadership through change that avoids the errors of constant change and of refusal to change.¹⁰ The Biblical witness is one that holds onto what has gone before, without that preventing change. Sam Wells suggests that we might learn from the practice of

¹⁰ See Andrew P. Hogue and L. Gregory Jones, *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Abingdon Press, 2021).

'over-accepting' in dramatic improvisation, "in which a community fits a new action or concept into a larger narrative, into the greater drama of what God is doing in the world."¹¹ Both Jones and Wells offer us models of what we might call 'faithful creativity' that hold onto what we have been given, but which impel us to move forward in new directions. This is the paradox of liturgical worship, in which we try to sing a new song and are held and supported by the ongoing prayer of the liturgy. It is the paradox of preaching, when the ancient witness of the Bible is brought into the present through the preacher's craft.

24. The thread running through all of this is the Spirit of God. Eucharistic Prayer A asks God to "renew us by your Spirit, inspire us with your love and unite us in the body of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord".¹² It is the Spirit of God that moves on the waters at creation (Gen. 1.1); it is the Spirit which is breathed into Adam (Gen. 2.7); and the Spirit which inspires all whose craft or art assist with the worship of God (Ex. 35.31); and the Spirit who inspires the scriptures themselves (1 Tim. 3.16). It is the spirit who inspires our prayer (Romans 8.26-27) and gives us the words to speak (Mark 13.11). It is in the power of the Spirit that the God who created the world will sing through us, though we do not yet know the words or the tune.

D. Bravery – We are courageous with our voices and actions

25. Biblical accounts of bravery often begin with the book of Joshua. After the death of Moses, the Lord speaks to Joshua and says, "Be strong and courageous ... I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you may go" (Joshua 1.6,9). As he takes over the leadership of God's people, and prepares to lead them in a military campaign as they enter the promised land, Joshua is commended to have courage. And this courage is to be founded upon God's presence. Joshua's courage, and that of the people of Israel, is then recounted in the book that follows.
26. Near the end of the book of Joshua, once the military campaign is over the tribes whose territory is in Gilead (Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh), to the east of the river Jordan, are blessed and given leave to return by Joshua. Just before crossing the Jordan, the eastern tribes build an altar to the Lord at Geliloth. This is described as an "altar of great size" (Joshua 22.10). This angers the rest of the Israelites, fearing that the eastern tribes are setting up an alternative power base. They gather at Shiloh and prepare for war. Phinehas the priest is sent to confront the eastern tribes and brokers a compromise whereby the altar is designated an altar of witness. "A witness between us and you, and between the generations after us, that we do perform the service of the Lord in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and offerings of wellbeing; so that your children may never say to our children in time to come, 'You have no portion in the Lord' ... the Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar Witness; 'For', said they, 'it is a witness between us that the Lord is God'" (Joshua 22.27, 34). Here there is courage on all sides in accepting fears and explanations, and in choosing to live together despite the challenges. Bravery is needed for reconciliation.

¹¹ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 13.

¹² *Common Worship*, p. 187.

27. Courage is a frequent biblical refrain, especially in times of transition or adversity. In handing over to Solomon, David urges him to “Be strong and of good courage, and act. Do not be afraid or dismayed; for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you” (1 Chron. 28.20). Daniel, under threat in exile, is told in a vision “Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!” (Daniel 10.19). The Psalmist urges us to “Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (Psalm 27.14). The conditions for bravery in these few passages alone are above all knowing the presence of God, but also putting aside fear, knowing that one is safe, and the patience of waiting on God.
28. Jesus says to the terrified disciples in the boat as he makes to walk past them “Take courage! It is I, don’t be afraid” (Mark 6.50, NIV). As well as being one of the many (reputedly 365) instances of the biblical phrase “Do not be afraid”, this is also a theophany – a moment in which Jesus’ divinity is on display (underlined by Jesus saying ‘I am’ – the name of God in Ex. 3.14). Whether here, or in the appearance of an angel to Mary (Luke 1.30), when God is doing a new thing, or when God is revealed, there is a need for bravery expressed by people being told ‘do not be afraid’.
29. At the end of the long discourse at the Last Supper, Jesus concludes by telling the eleven disciples “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world” (John 16.33). Here is the deepest root of Christian bravery – in his death and resurrection, Jesus has already overcome. Sin and death are already defeated. This means that we do not have to defeat them, but that we have only to bear witness that they have already been defeated. At the height of Apartheid, Desmond Tutu got into the pulpit to preach, only for soldiers and riot police to enter and surround the walls of the cathedral. With a smile on his face, Tutu addressed the newcomers: “Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side”.¹³
30. Our bravery is rooted in the salvation won by Jesus. There is bravery in witnessing to Jesus, in calling for the justice and righteousness that flow from salvation, and in the reconciliation that is needed between human beings, within the church, with creation, and with God. A blessing originating in the Prayer Book as Proposed in 1928 may encompass all of this: “Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honour everyone; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit; and the blessing of almighty God ...”
31. These reflections are far from the last word to be said about any of the four values of openness, generosity, creativity and bravery. My hope is that they will open up generous conversation and insight that can be creative and brave in where it takes us.¹⁴

Simon Taylor
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¹³ The story is told in Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the American Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn’t get it* Oxford: Lion, 2005), pp. 347-48.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Christopher Bryan for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.