

'Imagine That' - Performing the Four Gospels

Damian Coleridge 2004

For a couple of years now I've been interested in the performing of the four Gospels. In 2001 this led to my initiating the 4 Mysteries Project which has since involved thirty theatre practitioners in two workshops and a performance of the Mark Passion. Eighteen months ago an actor involved in one of the workshops told me he was at a dinner party when someone asked him what he was doing and he replied John's Gospel: end of conversation. The questions left hovering in the air. Had he got religion or what? Gone all evangelical or something? He added it was as if these stories had lost their psychic power with large sections of our society.

It's the context in which the work of telling them goes on. As ever what's required if their power is to be released is a re-imagining of them; in the way, say, that the director Julie Taymor re-imagined 'The Lion King' for the stage. She was determined that, 'audiences be released from memories of the film right from the start. I wanted them to take a leap of faith and imagination.' It's what many artists seek in their work - Mel Gibson among them - though audiences at a Gospel performance may need to be released from their memories of 'The Passion of the Christ' if they're to take such a leap.

We need to be assisted in this if we're to enter the upside down world of the Gospels. As we do we may find our one dimensional readings opening onto colour, movement, vitality, wonder. In turn this may lead to the recovery of another dimension in our performance of the Gospels - a mythic dimension - where myth refers not to the bloody, colourful spin we put on things, but, as one theologian describes it, 'primal desire, primal hope'; where, in theatre and out, myth is one of the best ways we have of getting at this; indeed, where myth may be spoken of as, 'the way we used to talk about ourselves before we learnt to lie.' In the context of the Gospels the mythic thing is a way of imagining Jesus. The crucifixion accounts for instance - at least according to the Gospels - are the prime moments for the revealing of God. They're not simply bloodily realistic scenes: they're mythic. Moments when primal desire and primal hope are revealed to us. Imagine that.

'Once and always

was

the Imagining

and the Imagining

was alive to the being of God
the very soul of God
was the Imagining.'

They're the opening lines of the translation of John's Gospel by Adrian Coleridge. Tim Winton once alluded to something like this when he said of the Gospels that, 'as stories, as lives ... they ring true to me ... probably a matter of imagination for what else is belief mostly built on.'

These days a lot of us might think imagination OK but wonder about its connection with belief. 'Belief is otiose' declared the novelist Martin Amis in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. 'Buddhism is more about things you can do ... rather than just a whole set of beliefs', observed someone in a recent newspaper report. And on TV a bloke was asked, 'do you believe there's life elsewhere in the universe?' To which he replied, 'I not only believe I know.' What interests me is believing as a way of knowing, but with a difference. Many of us aren't sure what it might mean for someone to say, 'now I know', or 'now we know', as the townspeople say at the end of the woman at the well story in John's Gospel. It may sound like 'just belief', whereas it's knowing as the experience of believing. People come to experience belief in Jesus - his presence, this relationship - as a different way of knowing what it is to be alive in the world. Their lives are turned round (and turning, they begin to dance.) Performance is a great way of getting at this; of stepping past our too knowing habits of mind so that we might give shape to a fusion of imagination and belief.

In the midst of everything else that claims our attention why is this important? Telling these stories (and all sorts of stories) is important because as the native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko wrote in her novel 'Ceremony': 'I will tell you something about stories ... they aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have you see all we have to fight off illness and death. Their evil is mighty but it can't stand up to our stories. So they try to destroy the stories, let the stories be confused or forgotten ... because we would be defenceless then.' Sometimes this process is in your face, but more often than not insinuating as we whisper to ourselves our self-help stories, or take to heart the dark and/or edgy storylines that crowd the local video store.

Moreover, in the matter of why our storytelling is important there's a Jewish saying that God created us because he loves stories; to which someone once responded it's not that God loves stories it's that God is a story: 'the only way to encounter God is to recount God.' Consequently a friend can speak of 'the spiritual discipline of telling the story, of keeping a story alive', simply because it's there we might encounter God, an event which is at the heart of the biblical account of who we are.

What kind of story is it? 'The root metaphor of the Bible is the journey', as I was reminded recently: 'the experience of God is best imagined as a journey.' Though it's not necessarily what we'd planned because it's a dislocating experience. The biblical witness is that it uproots us and sends us on our way, wandering at first, till our wanderings become a hard won journeying. In that sense it's possible to speak of an unnerving, purposeful dislocation. 'Journeys are what theatre does best', according to the actor Neil Pigot, whose hope is the theatre may be a place of our journeying together; a space where theatre companies and their artists might be drawn into 'a coherent, creative conversation' which is alive to the wider conversations in the culture and open to an audience's participation. 'You're on a pilgrimage', another actor said to me. 'Well, yes', I replied. For three years I've been wandering and journeying up to Jerusalem and beyond. A journey of faith - in the Gospels, in theatre - which has taken me to places I've never been before, strange places, in search of a coherent, creative conversation - a spiritual discipline - and an audience keen to be part of it. Who knows where it might lead?