

The Extraordinary & the Ordinary: Vocation as a mutual reading of scripture & contemporary culture.

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In this paper, I intend to explore the idea of vocation as John Wesley understood it, particularly as a tension between the extraordinary & the ordinary. I will then go on to use the idea of extraordinary call to explore a hermeneutical flow between scripture & film, and as a way of exploring the importance of vocation in the dialogue between faith & contemporary culture.

As the leader of a religious movement, Wesley was immersed in the tension between organisation and charism – as his movement spread, so the structures he intended were inevitably moderated by exceptional circumstances and people. Nowhere is this tension better illustrated than in the issue of women preachers in Methodist societies. Wesley was only too well aware that Susannah frequently spoke from the Epworth pulpit, at least as successfully than Samuel. However, it was Mary Bosanquet who brought the issue to a head. She was assisted by Sarah Crosby, who with Mary began addressing members of her local society. She asked Wesley's judgment on the matter, saying, "If I did not believe I had an extraordinary call, I would not act in an extraordinary manner." Wesley's response in a letter of June 1771 was to acknowledge her right to proclaim the gospel at a time when such an idea would have been unthinkable to his Anglican colleagues: "I think the strength of the cause rests there – on your *extraordinary* call. So I am persuaded has every one of our lay preachers; otherwise I could not countenance his preaching at all. It is plain to me that the whole work of God termed Methodism is an extraordinary dispensation of his Providence. Therefore I do not wonder if several things occur wherein which do not fall under the ordinary rules of discipline"¹

Nor was this an isolated case. In effect, Sarah Crosby, Hannah Harrison, Eliza Bennis, Jane Cooper, and others were engaged in a preaching ministry in Methodist societies, and many people experienced conversion as a result of their testimony and proclamation of the gospel. In 1787, despite the objections of some of the male preachers, he officially authorized Sarah Mallet to preach, as long as she proclaimed the doctrines and adhered to the disciplines that all Methodist preachers were expected to accept. He wrote offering advice: "Never continue the service above one hour at once – singing, preaching, prayer and all" adding later "if you go on with the work to which God has called you, you will frequently have cause (for conflict)"²

It seems that Wesley nevertheless acquired his sense of an extraordinary call from God which could modify other considerations of discipline and order from his reading of the biblical prophets. In his sermon *The Ministerial Office* (on Hebs 5:4), Wesley concludes: "we have reason to believe there were, in every age, two sorts of Prophets. The *extraordinary*, such as Nathan, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many others, on whom the Holy Ghost came in an extraordinary manner. Such was Amos in particular, who saith of

himself: "I was no Prophet, neither a Prophet's son; but I was an herdman: And the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel.~" The *ordinary* were those who were educated in "the schools of the Prophets," one of which was at Ramah, over which Samuel presided. (1 Sam. 19:18.) These were trained up to instruct the people, and were the ordinary preachers in their synagogues. In the New Testament they are usually termed scribes, or nomikoi "expounders of the law." But few, if any of them, were Priests. These were all along a different order." (my italics) Wesley goes on in the sermon to detail the ministries of several leading Methodist preachers, adding that they were extraordinarily called to exercise not a sacramental but a preaching \ prophetic ministry. In his notes on Ez 1:3, Wesley describes the prophet as: "Priest - He was of the priests originally; he was a prophet by an extraordinary call. The hand - He felt the power of God opening his eyes to see the visions, opening his ear to hear the voice, and his heart to receive both. When the hand of the Lord goes along with his word, then it becomes effectual"

So, Wesley used a model of the ordinary & extraordinary as a tool for handling special cases of preaching vocation thrown up by the Methodist movement. He believed that such an extraordinary call is essential for the preacher's ministry, but understood that other more prosaic callings were necessary for the health of the movement. "Abide in your calling" was Wesley's advice to Mary Bishop in a letter of March 1777 In this he admits that there are more mundane "ordinary" aspects to calling: "Neither do I apprehend that you would be more useful in a boarding school than in your present situation. You have a large field of action; you have employment enough, both temporal and spiritual; and you have ease enough"³ This combination of the pragmatic, the holistic and the opportune is a useful corrective to the sense that Wesley would only see the dramatic, extraordinary call as God-given.

However, a Methodism took on a more institutional character following Wesley's death, this special exemption for women preachers was removed, as generally there was more value, in less fevered times, to what Wesley would have called ordinary call – received through the offices of the church, sustained by the more routine means of grace such as sacrament, bible & fellowship meeting.

This tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary is I think helpful in sensing the importance of call in contemporary culture. Indeed, Peter Kratzke in his work on the poet George Stirling identifies a similar two-fold dynamic to vocation, here *enthusiasm* and *pedantry*: "Vocation is central to the American dream, and California's forty-niner promise "to get rich quick" continues to exemplify America's seemingly wide-open opportunities. Silicon Valley's "dot-commers" are the Pioneer's descendents. In the category of vocation, at one limit is what may be labeled enthusiasm (literally, "having a god within") and at the other pedantry. Neither limit is logically possible: because we do not live in a vacuum, we organize institutions, but in the very act of organizing are the seeds of pedantry. To moderate between the extremes, we typically strike a balance in the principle of service, a principle most obviously manifest in our everyday jobs"⁴. There is then a tension, a fragmentation, at the heart of vocation, also held in scripture, between the call to step beyond the ordinary, and the very human desire to confirm, to

receive praise and to fit in. This becomes very evident in our later exploration of Jeremiah.

Vocation is a theme which tracks the changing fragmented sense of self in postmodernity, in which people make their own identity out of the raw materials of popular culture: ‘who are you going to be today?’ as the Microsoft slogan had it. Vocation also tracks the retreat of Christendom, in which vocation is no longer seen as a priestly or even churchly issue, but rather open to anyone’s self-appraisal and self-definition. Vocation has been seen traditionally as a description of a profession, a working life, not a whole life. However, within contemporary culture there is a lively exploration of the idea of purpose, vocation and meaning. One recent example would be the comedian Peter Kay who has commented ‘Even then,’ (as a five-year-old) ‘I knew my talent for comedy was more of a vocation, a calling’⁵ Today, people get at least as much a sense of vocation from movies or fiction as they do from religious texts or communities. Perhaps this is most evident in contemporary explorations of identity. TV explores the question of fractured identity and calling in series such as Doctor Who, & Jekyll. Recent films based on comic book superheroes also explore this dichotomy between freedom and calling. Trying to answer the question: ‘what makes them who they are?’ is a much more difficult and complex question than in earlier cinematic incarnations of such heroes from the 70’s and 80’s. There is a fascination with what makes a hero ‘tick’ – whether it be in Christopher Nolan’s Batman Begins or the recent Brian Singer movie Superman Returns.

Mary Hess adds that: ‘human story-telling, at least in this time and place, is thoroughly embedded in and permeated by mass-mediated popular culture. Pop culture shapes our narratives in multiple ways, including our religious narratives.. stories invite us into unknown worlds.. they invite us to encounter things and people, places and practices, that are in some way “other” to us. Both scripture and mass-mediated popular culture invite us into the unfamiliar, invite us to encounter the other... and what does encountering the unfamiliar in popular culture have to do with encountering the unfamiliar in scripture?’⁶ One way of taking this further is found in the work of Larry J Kreitzer.

Reversing the hermeneutical flow

Larry Kreitzer has, in his work correlating fiction, film and scripture, developed a theory he has called ‘reverse hermeneutical flow’. Hermeneutical flow, as it is usually understood, is that meaning flows from the text to the world, so the meaning of a text is ‘contained’ in the text, and it must be ‘extracted’ by readers. In this model, the task of the interpreter is to understand the author, examine what the author intends, and so find what text is ‘about’. More nuanced versions would focus on the role of the reader in bringing her own world into dialogue with that of the text. Differences of opinion over the role of reader and text are still very much live⁷ but Kreitzer’s approach is rather: ‘to plot some of the ways in which our understanding of the diversity of meaning inherent in biblical texts can be brought out into the open by examining key works of literature and their cinematic adoptions.’⁸

An example is his treatment of the “heart of darkness” motif in Gospel Images in Fiction and Film. He links Joseph Conrad’s novel to the film Apocalypse Now and apocalyptic

texts in Mark 13 and Revelation 17. All this, he argues, might help us to flesh out the context of fear and experience of terror as part of the early Jewish and Christian experience which informed the apocalyptic writings. This approach has been criticised for eisegesis (reading into texts what we wish to see) and for an author-centred interpretation; the latter of which Kreitzer unapologetically owns. What it does, I believe, is offer one possible model for mutual reading.

A mutual reading – “extraordinary” calling in the film Spider Man 2 and the book of Jeremiah.

How might this sort of mutual reading work out? I would like to explore Kreitzer’s ‘reverse hermeneutical flow’ to test how creative a dialogue can be between an icon of popular culture and a biblical text which explores similar themes. What is attempted here is not a paralleling exercise (merely identifying similarities) but to ask how both icon and text can mutually question each other.

Sam Raimi’s Spider Man 2 is one of the top ten biggest grossing films in US, and in the top 20 worldwide. It won Academy Awards for special effects. It is regarded by fans and critics as one of the strongest examples of the genre. Its tagline was simple: ‘sacrifice, destiny, choice’. It tells the story of how Peter Parker must face his own demons, and find his own reasons to be Spider Man, if the world is to be saved.

Spider Man 2 is a particularly interesting example of the genre. It is entertainment that is also serious. Peter Parker is fated to be Spider Man. He feels his life taken from him, he is unable to be a friend, lover, to help those closest to him. The news media are hostile to Spider Man, always ready to see duplicity and self-serving in his actions. Peter feels out of his depth and in a dream sequence cries out to his mentor Uncle Ben: ‘I can’t live your dreams anymore. I want a life of my own.’ To which the response has become a movie cliché ‘You have been given a gift, Peter. With great power comes great responsibility. Take my hand, son’. Instead, Peter declares ‘No. I’m Peter Parker. Spider Man no more.. Am I not supposed to have what I want, what I need?’ He puts his costume in a dumpster and tries to live a normal life.

At first this is idyllic. Against a music track of “Raindrops keep falling on my head” (with connotations of a similar escapist sequence in the 1969 film Butch Cassidy & Sundance Kid), Peter succeeds as a student, enjoys life, and is around for his girlfriend. However, his destiny will not leave him alone. Even as a non-hero he is compelled to enter a burning building to help a small child, but cannot save everyone. He has a long conversation with his aunt, in which she articulates a typically north American sort of ethic: ‘I believe there’s a hero in each of us, that keeps us honest, gives us strength, makes us noble, and finally allows us to die with pride. Even though we sometimes have to be steady and give up the thing we want the most. Even give up our dreams.’ And so, endeavouring to be “steady”, Spider Man returns to do battle with his arch-enemy Dr. Octopus. Only at the end of the film is there a resolution of Peter’s ambivalent superhero identity. In a moving description of vocation his girlfriend declares: ‘It’s wrong that we should be only half alive, half of ourselves...’ So Spider Man disappears into the sunset, at last true to himself.

Peter Bradshaw comments: 'Spider Man is rare among superhero myths in showing how actually being one would mean letting down your family and friends all the time, and how being true to your self isn't easy when you're not sure what that is'. In a culture in which we are invited to continually make and re-make ourselves, it is challenging to encounter a character who has to live with a given identity, for the good of others. Despite the rather thin ethics and characterisation, this self-reflective core at the heart of the movie makes it a particularly interesting dialogue partner with other patterns of vocation in the Bible.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, one of the most interesting locations of this kind of exploration is in the prophets. In Jeremiah, there is a clear picture of a known and called, persecuted and lonely figure. In Jeremiah, the whole person is called, not just to proclaim the divine words but to enact them too, and a community defines itself. "To enter the book of Jeremiah is to enter a colloquy of voices. These voices contend with each other to give meaning to a national tragedy so devastating it defies simple explanation and rational analysis"⁹

One such voice is found in the so-called 'confessions' of Jeremiah where he declares his despair and anger at his lot. These texts are too deeply enmeshed in the redactive process to be confidently read as historical moments: 'Although many interpreters find in the confessions a window into the inner life of the prophet, the relationship of the poems to a historical person cannot be known'¹⁰. However, in their intensity, these laments both function as an apologetic against 'false prophets' (perhaps those too deeply enmeshed in the "ordinary"?) and to help create a character whose life of suffering symbolises his message of painful judgement. The community's rejection of Jeremiah's message and person contributes to the theodicy carried in its pages: 'By rejecting Jeremiah as prophet and covenant mediator the people bring the tragedy on themselves. But later, Jeremiah's suffering and lamentation become iconic of the pain and hopelessness of the exilic audience.. his life, with it's anger and resistance, it's suffering and captivity, is a symbol that interprets their reality'¹¹

The detail of the confessions shows Jeremiah's life breaking up. Despite great personal cost, Jeremiah cannot hold the Word within, he must be who he is called to be, and there are some startling and honest cries against God:

'I was like a lamb led to the slaughter...

O Lord, you have enticed me and I was enticed:

You have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.' (20.7)

There is a strong sense throughout of vulnerability and injustice: 'I have become a laughing stock all day long; everyone mocks me' (20.7) There is also compulsion... "For whenever I speak, I must cry out. I must shout: 'Violence and destruction. For the Word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say I will not mention him or speak any more in his name' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones" (20.8-9) The lament form brings this out strongly, in its incessant questioning: 'Why is my pain unceasing? My wound incurable' (15.15-18) This reaches a climax in the desire to end his life: 'Cursed be the day I was born!'

(20.14). Everything imaginable is to be annihilated – except God.

The book of Jeremiah reminds us that faithfulness does not lead neatly to well-being, but to recurrent crisis. Troubled bitter faith is left unresolved.¹² It's worth noting that Jeremiah holds in tension this bitter sense of betrayal with a sense of unworthiness typical of the prophetic call in chapter 1.

What might a film like Spider Man 2 add to this nuanced and powerful self-description? How might we look at Jeremiah differently after an encounter with Spider Man 2? Perhaps with a sense of poignancy, a sense of disrupted personhood, for Spider Man 2 is in many ways a study in what we have to give up to be ourselves. Mark Kermode thinks: 'Although Parker is able to pull off the Spider-Man mask at will.. he soon begins to wonder whether he still has a face of his own underneath.' The anguish and vulnerability of a calling are all explored in some depth. His very identity is at stake. This expands the dimensions of our understanding of Jeremiah, whose very identity is claimed by the slander and violence of 'false prophets'. Because we engage emotionally with the movie's depiction of Parker's identity crisis, we understand more of the crisis through which Jeremiah passes, we understand with our emotions, we understand visually, as well as rationally.

Disruption permeates this movie, as indeed disruption permeates the world of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah is born out of a cauldron of perilous, chaotic and conflictual times: the destruction of sacred space, and a collapse in national identity. So, it becomes crucial that the symbol of Jeremiah holds his identity in the face of persecution and suffering. Jeremiah also realises that his whole identity is at stake, and with it, we realise, the identity of the whole people. There is nowhere to which he can retreat - his laments are a recognition of that. But like Peter Parker, he resists his fate. Jeremiah dares to imagine, in a kind of reverse symbolic action, a cancellation of his ministry, of his life, not unlike the moment when Parker drops his costume in a dumpster. He wishes to unmake his life so that he would not have to deliver such a message and see it fulfilled 'so that my mother would have been my grave (*instead of the place of calling*) and her womb forever great. (*an ironic comment on God's knowledge of Jeremiah in the womb 1:5*)' (20.17), my italics. In this he longs for a more "ordinary" calling, to serve God in the temple hierarchy or the local community, away from the fierce wind of the future about to break upon the nation.

There is then a reverse hermeneutic flow from Spider Man 2 into Jeremiah, which helps us to explore the human cost of vocation, and its centrality to what it is to be human. What might it be like to live as "... only half of ourselves". As the campus doctor tells Peter: 'Gotta make you mad not knowing who you are, your soul disappears'. However, the difference between the two narratives are palpable. Spider Man of course wins in the end, as in all comic books. Jeremiah by contrast, travels into captivity and anonymity. Jeremiah's personal laments are entwined with Yahweh's own cries of pain (eg.15.5-9; 18.13-17) in a double helix of suffering. There is no resolution for Jeremiah, and his identity is not that of the easy ethics of Peter's Aunt ('Courageous self-sacrificial people, setting an example for all of us'), but scandalous declarations about the whole of his

culture, and about the nature of a God who was bringing things to judgement, to a climax. However we look at Jeremiah, however we understand the role of editors in creating a composite character, we see him differently after an encounter with Spider Man 2. If nothing else, we are more attentive to the fragility of the self in relation to a calling God.

This strange and suggestive combination of biblical and cultural texts, the profound and the trite, of wisdom and revelation, of the cinematic and the scriptural, opens us most radically to the reality of our postmodern \ hyper-modern world, and opens up a dialogue which others may want to explore further.

In conclusion, this reverse hermeneutic opens up real questions about the nature of vocation. Wesley identified an “extraordinary” quality to calling which could override order and discipline, and openness to which was a founding charism of the Methodist movement. The struggle with vocation we find in the movie Spider Man 2 & the harrowing laments of Jeremiah ask the questions as to where vocation comes from and whether there is more to it than “self-actualization”. Interestingly, contemporary culture is asking that question too.

There is something in responding to a sense of calling, and a life founded in a particular vocation, which opens us to experience of “the other” – people, challenges and situations which are beyond our experience. To move confidently in our postmodern culture , we must be open not only to the strangeness of “the other”, but also to the strangeness of biblical texts, such as those haunting laments from Jeremiah, and the strangeness of the prophetic vocation it describes.

¹ Letters of John Wesley, London: Epworth Press 1960 Vol V, p.257

² Letters, Vol viii, p.190 & 228

³ Letters Vol vi, p.258.

⁴ Peter Kratzke “The man who would have it all: George Stirling and the American Dream” in americanpopularculture.com June 2005

⁵ Peter Kay, The Sound of Laughter, Century Press 2006

⁶ Mary E Hess: ‘The Bible and popular culture : engaging sacred text in a World of Others’ in New Paradigms for Bible Study Robert M Fowler & Edith Blumhofer & Fernando Segovia (eds) , Edinburgh T&T Clark 2004

⁷ See Kevin Vanhoozer’s strongly non-reductionist, Is there a meaning in this text? Grand Rapids, Zondervan Press, 1998

⁸ Larry J Kreitzer, Gospel Images in fiction & film London, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002

⁹ Kathleen O Connor in John Barton & John Muddiman (eds) The Oxford Bible Commentary, Oxford, OUP 2001, p.487

¹⁰ O Connor p.499

¹¹ O Connor, p.500

¹² See Walter Breuggemann, A Commentary on Jeremiah Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1998