



The School Chaplains' Conference

Encyclical 81, Michaelmas term 2006

Professor Martyn Percy ran the gauntlet of the last session in the three day conference framed on St John's Gospel at Trinity College, Oxford last Easter. His paper was suitably wide-ranging to conclude the proceedings but was so insightful that we will benefit from seeing it stand alone. It is helpfully constructed in clear parts. The theological direction taken by Martyn Percy is the miracle of transformation in the hurly-burly of everyday life, which is very much the focus of chaplaincy.

There is a tenuous link with the articles on Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code. Not only is the DVD still on the 'must have' list for Christmas—and that is the justification for their inclusion—but also, Martyn is accurately quoted by Brown in the novel.

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The Nature of Encounter: Four Case-Studies in Conversion

Firstly Professor Percy considered the concept of conversion. The word 'conversion' has its own history outside religion. As a noun, it can mean to change or to switch something.

Adaptation, transformation, renovation, alteration or transfer can all be implied in the use of the term. Money can be converted from one currency to another; a small family saloon adapted and converted, to be transformed into a rally or racing car; a barn renovated and converted into a spacious home.

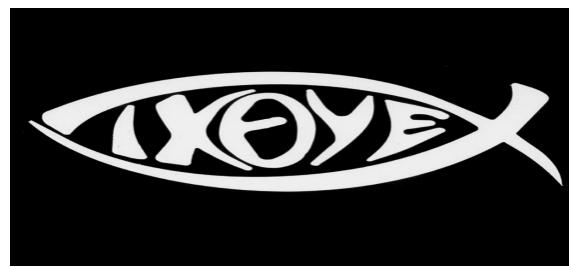


But in religious usage, the term tends to connote something else: a radical change, either from one religion to another, or from no religion to the dramatic discovery of faith, and a new relationship with God. When religious people speak of conversion, they normally refer to the idea that – irrespective of their faith tradition – a major and drastic revolution has occurred in someone's life. They are now 'saved'; they have been 'born again'; they are now part of 'the true faith'.

There are good reasons for religious people to understand conversion in this revolutionary way, rather than in the more adaptive and mellow way that the term is normally used in secular language. Consider, for example, Paul the Apostle, one of the first and most dramatic converts to Christianity. The Book of Acts records that Saul (his pre-Christian name) was a zealous persecutor of Christians. But whilst on the road to Damascus, he has a dramatic encounter – bright light is seen, and the voice of Jesus heard – which makes Saul temporarily blind. He emerges from his blindness as a convert to a new faith. Paul’s ‘Damascus road experience’ (a common phrase drawn from the Bible that has since become part of the ordinary cultural-linguistic furniture), it is a typical trope or metaphor for what many regard as religious conversion, “I once was blind, but now I see,” is how Newton put it in the hymn, ‘Amazing Grace’.

But Paul’s dramatic conversion is not a proto-typical experience – a template that should frame and judge all other conversions. Paul came to Christianity some years after Jesus is said to have risen and ascended, which begs a question about the other apostles, who had known Jesus in his earthly life. At what point, one might ask, were the disciples converted

from Judaism to Christianity? The Bible is somewhat silent on the matter. The Resurrection stories suggest that the disciples were fearful and joyful in equal measure, but whatever they made of the Resurrection appearances that they were seeing and experiencing, they still attended ‘the temple’. At the end of the gospels, the followers of Jesus are still Jewish, even if, like their master, they are out of sorts with the Pharisees and Sadducees. Traditionally, the Christian church dates its birth from the feast of Pentecost, another dramatic ‘conversion’ story, in which the disciples receive the Holy Spirit. This may be so, but even in this narrative – also recorded in the Book of Acts – there is no obvious Christian identity to appeal to. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the New Testament at no point gives a definition of what a Christian actually is. Of course, there are hints and clues in stories – ‘repent and believe’, ‘follow Jesus’, ‘receive the Holy Spirit’, ‘eat and drink in remembrance of me’ – but no formal creed or description by which one can make decisive judgments that include or exclude believers.



That said, the first Christian communities that emerged were marked by difference. When Christians began to understand that their beliefs and practices no longer ‘fitted’ with the worship of the Temple and synagogue, they began to meet in their own homes, and perhaps in meeting rooms too, just as Jesus and the disciples had once eaten together in an upper room. They chose a modest title to describe these gatherings – the Greek word *ekklesia* – which simply means assembly. In the Hellenic world of the first century [CE], every major town had its own *ekklesia* – the assembly that dealt with civic matters, law, commerce and the general policing and welfare of the population. Such assemblies would have been run by men, and normally it was only men who could attend.

But Christian assemblies were, from the beginning, different. Women would be present – and they might speak too. Children might be there also. Apart from Jews, there might be Greeks, gentiles and other ethnic or national groups. And, most revolutionary of all, slaves were also admitted. In other words, from the very beginning of Christianity, its assemblies were radically inclusive. Or, put another way, Christians *converted* the

way that we understand assemblage: their *ekklesia* was for everyone. Belonging to this community (of God) or faith no longer depended on where or to whom you were born; it rested solely on the willingness of the individual, family or other group to be converted, and then to belong. It is also important to remember that for these first ‘converts’ to Christianity, there was no New Testament, no creeds, and very little in the way of church structures. But it still meant leaving one religion for another. So converting to Christianity, for the first generation of believers, was often a costly business; it meant believing that Jesus was the Son of God, and then being filled with the Holy Spirit – but it could also mean persecution and martyrdom. Nonetheless, it was a simple faith, but with a radical message – and it spread like wildfire.

Conversion in history:

That said, Christianity was a pragmatic and accommodating religion, almost from the very beginning. Conversion took many forms. As Christian missionaries, began to spread throughout Europe, and also eastward towards India, they discovered that where the more familiar elements of a culture were retained, there was likely to be more success in introducing a ‘new’ religion. For example, Rodney Stark points out that ‘by thinly over-

laying pagan festivals and sacred places with Christian interpretations, the [7th century] missionaries made it easier [for people] to become Christian – so easy that actual conversion seldom occurred.’ If Stark’s cultural appraisal is correct, then it is probably also true that people cannot easily give up what they have yet to fully embrace. Stark cites the example of Clovis, who although baptised as a Christian, would not forsake his ancestral gods for political reasons, “The people that followeth me will not suffer that I forsake their gods.” And, although Christianity gradually ‘trickled down’ from the *élite* converts, - from the early European monastically-based missionaries who normally worked on the wives of kings, princes and rulers, converting them to Christianity first, down to the masses - the process taking hundreds of years - elements of paganism continued to survive.

It was no different for the European missionaries who set forth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Faced with practices that appeared not to correspond with ordinary, enculturated, Westernised Christian values, missionaries often had to adapt their message and praxis to secure conversions. In Vincent Donovan’s moving account of his missionary work amongst the Masai of Africa, Donovan finds his accounts of the Christian faith profoundly challenged. There is not only the language barrier to over-

come. There are also cultural and conceptual difficulties for the would-be missionary as he attempts to communicate the Christian faith. For example, the Masai insist that the whole tribe is baptised; the idea that individuals can be included or excluded from the rite offends them. Moreover, and more profoundly, tribal baptism turns out to be a radical *fulfilment* of the gospel. As the tribal elder, Ndnagoya explains, the catechesis has become part of the culture: the lazy have been helped by those with energy, the stupid supported by the intelligent, and those with faith have aided those who have little. The tribe can truly say ‘we believe’; it is just one of many epiphanies for Donovan.

Rituals for conversion:

The rituals that surround conversion can vary considerably. Baptism is the standard point of initiation into Christian faith, but there are differences of opinion on the right circumstances and age for baptism. The Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox, Anglicans and most mainline Protestant denominations practice infant baptism. Their sacramental view of baptism recognises that the child is brought into a salvific relationship with Christ even before the child can reason or articulate anything that might imply consent to conversion. Normally, the rite of Confirmation (and its equivalents) allows those same children a public opportunity to own the baptismal faith for them-

selves as they reach the beginning or end of childhood (i.e., between the ages of 7 and 14).

Some Protestant denominations, whilst not negating the importance of baptism, emphasise the need for a personal conversion for an individual first. Often, such a conversion has been marked by baptism by full immersion, and for some Pentecostal churches, is also marked by speaking in tongues as a sign of conversion. Classically, the great revivalist and evangelistic rallies and crusades of the last three hundred years have placed a stress on individuals 'knowing Christ personally' and making a personal response to a call for repentance and faith. From Wesley's 'strangely warmed' heart to Billy Graham's appeal to millions packed into stadiums to 'get up out [their seats]', and 'be born again', conversion has continued to be part of the vocabulary of Christian churches.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the rise of new Christian movements has witnessed new developments in ritual that mark conversion. Some new churches practice a form of Christianised 'Bar Mitzvah', which marks the passage of a youth from childhood to adulthood. The ritual can include walking over a specially constructed (and symbolic) bridge, and being blessed by the pastor and by parents. New types of catechetical material have also been developed,

some of which are designed to act as a catalyst for conversion. The global success of the *Alpha* course has allegedly been responsible for hundreds of thousands of conversions worldwide. Equally, many evangelistic agencies and their materials can make similar claims, with some justice. In the Roman Catholic church, the effectiveness of the new rites of initiation and catechesis have also led to many renewing their faith and religious commitment, moving from 'nominalism' to activism in their belief and practice.

Understanding conversion:

Conversion is a term that is usually associated with the transformation of an individual or community. Some scholars consider that there are three distinct elements to conversion: tradition, transformation and transcendence. Tradition refers to the religious context in which change takes place; transformation covers the specific changes (e.g., thoughts, beliefs, practices, etc); transcendence refers to the divine encounter that may be the catalyst for change. This leads scholars to conclude that there are five types of conversion that can be identified:

tradition transition – moving from one faith to another.

institutional transition – changing allegiance within a faith, such as moving from one denomination to another.

affiliation – an individual or group with no previous religious commitment joining a religious group or faith intensification – renewal of faith within a tradition.

apostasy – rejection and defection of faith, but embracing a religion that is based on the previous religious convictions.

Some scholars also theorise that conversion in the contemporary western world is partly the product of particular social, cultural or psychological contexts. One of these contexts may be a sense of crisis, in which religion offers a new coherent pattern of organisation and meaning for the convert, and makes better sense of the world than any social, therapeutic or psychological alternatives. For some, embracing religion may be a deliberate rejection of secularity, and an attempt to rebel against materialism. Other scholars point out that the secular, capitalist and post-modern, Western world leads many to a quest for meaning. In this scenario, conversion is understood as a motif within a journey - from nothingness to meaning. The rise in the popularity of new religious movements may support this hypothesis.

Conversion remains a term that is primarily used by the world's major faiths, and by many new religious

movements. It has no precise meaning, save to signify that the person or group now belongs to a faith in a new way, and that this belonging is marked by rituals, which in turn recognises that some profound transformation has taken place. The origins of most of the world's major religions also lie in there being some sense in which their founders have been converted: from passivity to activity, and from one understanding of their faith to a new one, which is normally the cue for others to convert to this new understanding. Jesus himself came to 'fulfil' the law and the prophets, but in his ministry so radicalised the reading and understanding of the Jewish faith that his followers converted, albeit through a series of encounters and progressive evolution in their belief and practice.

At the beginning of the third millennium, conversion remains an important issue for churches, and for also non-Christian faiths. In the case of Christian faith, many mainstream denominations now focus on evangelisation, re-evangelisation and on Christian education as never before. With society increasingly moulded by more secular values, and with generations now being raised that have 'gospel amnesia', the task of conversion has become more demanding, and is required to be more imaginative. Christian knowledge can no

longer be assumed to be widespread and embedded within society. Correspondingly, many patterns of evangelism that were once avidly practiced by churches are now being set aside in favour of more long-term programmes that seek to impart religious knowledge and Christian education within the public sphere. Often this is done through schools and other public institutions, and it also occurs in those contexts where the church is responsible for marking birth, marriage and death. However, such activity does not normally facilitate conversion; but it does begin to recreate the context in which churches might once again be able to talk about tradition, transformation and transcendence with some confidence.

At present, the churches normally have settled for less than this, acknowledging that whilst many continue to affirm a belief in God, and may also value spirituality, they nonetheless choose not to belong to churches or to other religious organisations. Persuading individuals and communities to convert ultimately requires the creation and nourishment of appropriate contexts. Ultimately, without conversion there is only organic growth, which quickly slows. This is often followed by a process of atrophy which many churches have

experienced during the twentieth century.

Arguably, churches, in their response to this milieu of modernity, need to rediscover both their courage and confidence in the hope that they offer the world. It is that hope – the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ – which has converted millions down the ages, and continues to do so in a new millennium in many parts of the world. For Christians, conversion is never a matter of turning to a programme, formula or organisation for transformation and salvation. True conversion is to a person, namely Christ; and it is a new or unique *encounter* with Jesus, as Paul on the road to Damascus would testify, that continues to be the central motif in any normative conversion narrative. Classically, it is the transforming moment that continues to define the meaning of conversion, “I once was lost, but now I am found; was blind, but now I see.” With these comments in mind, let me, if I may, turn to four kinds of encounter in scripture that involve subtle kinds of conversion.

First Case Study
Being “Salt of the Earth” (Matthew 5: 13-14)

Matthew 5: 13 reads, “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses

its strength, by what shall it be salted? It will be strong for nothing except to be cast away and trodden underfoot by men.”

In interpreting this text, most preachers and many bible commentaries work with a false assumption: that the ‘salt’ in this text is the white granular chemical we know as sodium chloride, normally found in a condiment set or kitchen cupboard, where its purpose is to add flavour to foods, or occasionally to act as a purifier or preservative.

Yet the fact that Jesus refers to ‘the salt of the earth’ ought to immediately alert us to another meaning for the text. The ‘salt’ (*halas*) mentioned in the text is hardly likely to be table salt, since it is chemical and culinary improbability that sodium chloride will lose its flavour. Any salt that is extracted from food, water or any other substance remains ‘salty’; even if it loses its form, it retains its essence, as many a spoilt meal and frustrated chef can bear witness.

The substance of Jesus’ words are, in Greek, *to halas tes ges*, ‘the salt of the earth’, with the word for ‘earth’ here not referring to the world at all, but rather to soil. In other words, the ‘salt’ that Jesus is referring to here is probably a kind of salt-like material or mineral such as potash or phosphate.



These *halas* elements were available in abundance in and around the Dead Sea area of Palestine, and were used for fertilising the land and enriching the manure pile, which was then spread on the land.

The soil contains many different elements, all of which are intertwined: ‘soil’ is the cultural context (i.e., religion, culture, ideology, etc), in which Christians are to ‘be salt’. The many soils of the world carry, in various degrees, qualities of empowerment and disempowerment within cultures. Moreover, in a post-modern world, we can now see that culture is being increasingly homogenized through globalisation, which has brought with it materialism, individualism, consumerism and hedonism, with the undesirable result of suffocating the life-giving force of the earth.

The empowering mission of the Church, like the salt of Jesus’ parable, has a consistency of power. However, that power, enculturated into contexts, does not lead to uniformity. Rather, it leads to considerable diversity of expression, growth and human flourishing. The salt has always to respect the type of earth in which it is situated. Diverse cultural sensibilities have to be taken into account in the mission of the Church. The soil can also be inhospitable: it may be rocky, thorny, and adversely affected by climatic conditions. Under these circumstances, the task of being the

salt of the earth is more demanding.

A key to understanding the relationship between Church and culture rests on a tension. On the one hand, Christians are to be engaged in the world and influence it, perhaps in ways that are not easily identified as specifically 'Christian'. The power of salt is that it is pervasive, and nourishing. On the other hand, Christianity also proclaims God's Kingdom – a radically 'other' culture that will sweep away the present order. This is the beacon of light set on hill: it illuminates the present, but points to a new order. This is the Christ who is above or against culture. The church seeks a kingdom that is to come. But it also strives to work in the world until that time. The church lives between two cultures, and it works for both.

However, the Church has, throughout history, struggled to live out being the salt of the earth, often in difficult situations brought about by forces that would rather maintain the status quo. Recent history has demonstrated that the church, because of its relation to political power, has on occasions fallen into the trap of so identifying with societies, that it has distorted the meaning of the Gospel. Examples of this are the collusion of the Church in Germany with Nazism, the Dutch Reformed Church and other Churches with Apartheid, and at the present time, certain kinds of

denominations in Central and South America that are heavily influenced by consumerism and the theology of prosperity. This way of understanding the *halas* (salt) of Jesus' metaphor changes the sense of the text significantly. In fact, it completely undermines the most conventional translations and expositions. The 'salt' is not to be kept apart from society, and neither is it to be used as a purifier or as an additive stabiliser. Disciples of Jesus are not to be simply preservers of the good society, and neither are they merely agreeable folk adding flavour to either an amoral or immoral society. More powerfully and positively, true religion, as salt, is a life-bringing force giving itself to an otherwise sterile culture. Thus, the 'salt' of Jesus' metaphor is a mutating but coherent agent that is both distinct yet diffusive in its self-expenditure. As a result of individuals, communities, values, witness and presence - the *halas* - being literally dug into society, the earth or soil will benefit, and many forms of life can then flourish. Correspondingly, salt that loses its strength (rather than its flavour) is only suitable for making paths, as the biblical text, 'trodden underfoot', confirms.

Thus, the salt of Jesus' metaphor is not only counter-cultural; it enriches 'the earth' and many more things besides, by being spread around and within it. There is an irony here.

The 'task' of the salt is not necessarily to maintain its own distinctiveness, but rather to enrich society through diffusiveness. There is a temporal dimension here: what must begin as distinct to be useful ends up being absorbed and lost. Of course, this reading of the metaphor makes sense of Jesus' own self-understanding, which in turn is reflected in his parables, teachings and other activities. So, if the church or the disciples of Jesus are the salt of the earth, they will begin by being a distinct yet essential component within society, but who will ultimately fulfil their vocation by engaging self-expenditure.

Second Case Study

Converting Witnesses: Luke 7: 36-50

A second encounter/conversion narrative that I wish to draw on relates to the guests at the feast of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus was always getting into trouble for his attitude to women, and for his easy association with sin and sinners. The woman anointing Jesus with tears and perfume, prompting the parable of the two debtors, is set in the context of a banquet at the house of Simon the Pharisee. The encounter is seminal, for Chapter 8 of the Gospel begins 'soon afterwards, he went through the villages and cities...preaching and bringing the good news of the king-

dom of God...'. These fourteen verses are therefore conclusive and suggestive. So what is going on?



At an oriental banquet, people reclined on low couches on the floor, with their feet behind them. It would be normal for doors to be left open so beggars could get scraps, and others be entertained by the intellectual jousting. Not everybody witnessing this meal would be a guest. The story is obviously about sin and forgiveness, and who deserves to be absolved. It makes the point that we all sin, some more than others, but it is sin nonetheless. Therefore, no-one ought to be too proud; neither should anyone be too ashamed. But it is also about a great deal more than that. Simon, it seems, was unsure about the status of his guest. He respected him enough to call him 'Rabbi', but failed to offer Jesus any of the usual courtesies that betokened warmth: no perfume, footbath or kiss - it was a rather formal, stilted, even sterile atmosphere. And so we are presented with the shock in the narrative: an un-named woman treats Jesus with more respect and warmth than the religious and wise host, who ought to know better. So who is really wise?

Who is really gracious? Answer: not Simon, with his purist concerns (v.39).

The irony of this story is that a 'rude' intruder shows the 'civilised' host how to behave properly. The key, of course, lies with this 'gatecrasher'. You can almost sense the 'tutting' eyes as the woman walks in, the whispers behind hands, almost as though a tramp had tried to sit at High Table, "What's *she* doing here?" We have no reason to suppose that the woman knew Jesus personally, but she knows enough of his reputation as a healer, teacher and person of compassion to come to the meal. Yet the encounter is to turn into something even more deeply complex and challenging.

This key to the parable draws a reluctant admission from the host. Great love can be the product of great forgiveness. Yet this woman, strangely, seems already to acknowledge her forgiveness from the outset, and the narrative makes it clear that she is pardoned before she enters the feast. In contrast, Jesus is treated with some indifference as he enters the same house. The function of the parable is to equate the scale of debt and forgiveness, and then the ultimate response. Set in the context of the feast however, the story goes beyond simply saying that the greater the debt, the more grateful the forgiven person will be. The narrative

contains more subversive seeds, contrasting Simon's assumed purity with the woman's apparent sinfulness.

Jesus tells us (*Mt 25*) that it is in the face of the prisoner (sinner), naked, poor, and hungry that we meet God. 'Whatever you do to (or receive) from these, you do also to me'. Perhaps Luke portrays the woman as an *ikon* of God, in order to subvert the false pride of Simon and his guests.

Like *God*, the woman takes the initiative, a bold feature of this story. She comes to Jesus as God comes to us: she is a revelation. It is not that Jesus finds her: she seeks him. Jesus is being 'lost' in this meal, and the woman's offering places him at the centre again. Yet the action of the woman will also call for a response, not just from Jesus, but from all the guests.

Like *Jesus*, she also serves, 'taking the form of a slave'. (*Phil 2*, etc.) There are echoes of the foot-washing of the disciples in *John 13*: there is a sacramental quality here. The whole ridiculous hierarchy of the meal is subverted by this act of service: 'I am among you as a servant'.

We don't know why she sinned, or necessarily even how - it was probably prostitution. But does it matter? No, because she puts any pride she has behind her, and gets on with giving her-

self in humility and strength. Like the *Holy Spirit*, she is poured out in oil and in tears, anointing the Son: 'this is my beloved, listen to him'. She settles on him, brooding over him like creation, giving of herself. The kisses are a seal; she is the giving gift of God. Here is true *kenosis* - self-emptying for the other. The whole event is a *Christophany*: Jesus and the woman mirroring each other in dynamic relationality.

It is perhaps strange to suggest that in the face of a woman of ill-repute we meet an *ikon* of God - a Trinitarian one at that. Yet the double-shock of this story is that Jesus lets himself be ministered to in this way. Simon would have flinched from the contamination; Jesus allows himself to be *caressed* by it. In this woman, we do meet God.

God is indeed embodied in the most surprising places, alive and well in the sick, the oppressed, the God-forsaken...not just the learned and the holy. What the story is starting to show us is that the power-powerless axis is a key to the story. Simon is the host with power, but he will not stoop to welcome Jesus properly. The woman is clearly powerless, yet she will lay aside her last sediments of power to embrace her healing, and to admit her need of Jesus. She is empowered; Simon disempowered.

The story appears in one form or another in all four Gospels (see *Mk* 14: 3-9, *Mt* 26: 6-13 & *Jn* 12: 3-7). What is interesting about the way in which the narrative is presented is that the anointing of Jesus is a recognition of his messianic personhood from *outside* the community of faith. The woman is given a male priestly role (c.f. *Exod.* 30: 22-23, on Aaron and Moses) of coronation, even though some of the Gospel writers cast the woman in the role of penitent, perhaps making the story slightly safer. (There may also be implied subtleties in Matthew and Mark having Jesus' head anointed, not his feet, as in Luke and John). Yet it is clear that the woman triumphs at Simon's feast. Her prophetic witness to Jesus is costly and compassionate, and it begs questions of any who readily number themselves amongst the righteous.

If it is true that pride comes before a fall, then you might think that the trick is to keep the pride, but watch your step. Yet the *art* with pride is to remember that we are fallen first in God's eyes: we started from the ground. There is a wonderful Fijian proverb that is used to deflate the powerful who appear to get above themselves, "The higher up the tree the monkey climbs, the more you see its bottom." It reminds us, as Simon and his guests appeared to have forgotten, that we are all human, and equal before God. Only from that position of humility can we experience the grace

to stand tall for ourselves, the other, and for God.

Third Case Study

The Woman at the Well: (John 4: 1-42)



In some respects, this is one of the most fascinating encounters we have in the gospel of John. Laden with playful subversive conversation, the encounter teases the reader with its meanings and inferences. The early verses of the story set the tempo. Jesus, we learn, is accused of baptising with water – a charge which is false, because it is his disciples and those of John who have been doing this. So Jesus starts to retreat to Galilee, where we are treated to a story about water and wells that never run dry. But before he can get to Galilee from Judaea, he must pass through Samaria – he has to cross a region that is, by definition, a place of taint and compromise that is normally to be avoided. But Jesus does not need to pass through Samaria; he could have chosen the route that follows the Jordan Valley, and

avoids Samaria. So John, in stating that Jesus ‘had’ to pass through Samaria is not making a cartographical point; Jesus chooses this route in the same way that the Son of Man ‘must’ suffer (Mark 8:31) – the accent is on Jesus’ obligation to a deeper path that remains concealed from most of those who follow him. This is why Jesus arrives at the town of Sychar (4: 5-6), where he then sits at Jacob’s Well (thereby linking Jesus with the Patriarchs), with John telling us that Jesus is ‘tired’. It is the sixth hour – a resonance, one suspects, with John’s later declaration in chapter 19: 13-14, where Pilate declares to the crowd, “Here is your king.”

And it is here that the Samaritan woman enters the story. The time of day for entry is critical, as it suggests her marginality. Water is traditionally drawn at dusk or early in the morning. But the sixth hour is noon, when the sun is at its hottest, suggesting that this woman’s company is questionable; she is something of an outsider within her own community. The woman is also unnamed, which can be interpreted as a cipher for ‘undesirable’, or even ‘sinner’ – the latter term having more of a social than ethical significance in the first century. What is startling, therefore, is Jesus’ direct address to her, “Give me a drink.” Furthermore, notes John, the disciples have all left to buy provisions: there is no mutuality of hospitality between Jews and Samaritans. This means that Jesus and the

woman are alone.

On a superficial level, this request can be read as a preliminary gesture of reconciliation. Jesus asks something of a Samaritan, and a woman. In so doing, there is a hint of equality in the conversation. Jesus needs her help, and he asks for it. But this gesture is, of course, met with astonishment: ‘how can you ask anything of me, a Samaritan?’ And the response from Jesus only serves to widen her eyes, for Jesus states that if she knew who she was talking to and what God gives, it is she who would be asking for water – ‘living water’. Or more accurately, in the Greek, this is ‘running water’ – of a kind that echoes that which *flowed* from the rock in the desert from the staff of Moses. John is, in other words, making a contrast between the still, perhaps even stale water of the well, and the water of life that Jesus speaks of. This is a water that, literally, brings life.



The conversation, like the depth of the well, goes another stage deeper at this point. The woman’s question becomes laced with rhetorical tropes: are you greater than Jacob?

Where do you get this living water from? John turns the woman’s astonishment into curiosity – she wades into the deeper waters of the conversation. And again, the conversation turns – with, what to us, must seem like a staged artificiality – draws the woman in even deeper. Jesus says, “Anyone who drinks from this well will be thirsty again ... but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst again.” Bearing in mind that there are no witnesses to this conversation, and that the disciples’ arrival at verse 28 causes the woman to depart, we have to assume that the nature of this encounter is staged, even if it may be rooted in an actual event. But this need not detain us, since it is reasonably clear that the gospel writer intends the reader to be drawn in to the conversation – even seduced by it – as indeed the woman is, to an extent.

The mention of ‘seduction’ is not accidental here, for in verse 10 there is a playful, and it must be said, highly ambiguous reference to ‘a spring of water gushing forth’. It is not easy to define a fixed meaning for the Greek term used here, partly because the word is rarely used of water, but more properly of animals or humans. The term literally translated means ‘leap’ or ‘well’ up, with connotations of release and liberation. This is a term more commonly associated with ecstasy, and yes, even the erotic. Water that ‘leaps up’ is capable of being read as a cipher – an interpretative

key for the next phase of the story, which will overshadow the liminality of the discussion about the woman's marital relationships, which in turn infers something about the religious status of Samaritans, and their actual attachment to Judaism.

Of course, it is possible to read this phase of story in a slightly less steamy way. One could, for example, simply take the leaping water to refer to wisdom as the 'fountain of life' (see Proverbs 13:14) – but I suspect that John intends us to read this story as a contrast between eros and agape. This is about sensual and earthly desires not being sated in the way that they expect, but being met by deeper and more fulfilling wisdom that transforms the very nature of human existence. So the woman, for the moment, plays ball, "Sir, give me that water so I will never be thirsty and never have to come back here to draw water." (v.15) The basic, earthly desires and hungers are being both met and set aside in this question. But the encounter has another twist, for the response from Jesus is not 'OK', but, "Go call your husband." It seems a very curious response to the woman's 'yes', but I suspect that this hinges on the encounter being rooted in the transformation of all desires.

Up until this point, there is a sense in which the passage can be read as

playful, or even (possibly) mildly flirtatious. Jesus is alone with a woman at a well (a deep hole, that brings forth sustenance and life), but the conversation quickly turns to being one about releasing fountains of water that will bring new life, satisfy deeply, and forever. It is not, then, a great surprise, that the conversation in the encounter moves from one of slight seduction into interrogation, "I have no husband," replies the woman. Jesus replies by stating that she has had five, and the man she now lives with is not her husband. We need to pause here at this point, and be reminded that at no point does Jesus explicitly suggest the woman is sinful. There could be many reasons why she has had five men, and is on her sixth. This may not be her fault. To lose a few husbands might be considered unfortunate in a peasant agrarian context; but I suppose to lose five must be marked down as downright careless. Perhaps this is what John intends – the woman is a cipher for Samaria – and the multiple partnerships are seen as a reflection of the alleged Samaritan dalliance with polytheism. Nonetheless, what we have here from Jesus is challenge, not condemnation. Moreover, the invitation extended by Jesus seems to centre not on repentance, but on a particular conversion of desire.

This reading makes sense of the continuing exchange. The woman perceives Jesus to be a prophet, and he in turn suggests that worship in the fu-

ture will neither be in Jerusalem or on the mountain, “Believe me, the hour is coming.” This leads to a parenthesis from Jesus on spirit and truth – not here as opposites to material and falsity – but more as a sign of completion. The further mention of ‘hour’ in verse 23 also alerts the reader to a ‘future’ Passover, which will ultimately obviate the need for worship to be located in a physical place; spirit and truth will prevail. It is no surprise, then, that this insight leads to the key epiphany in the text: the woman’s confession, and Jesus’ response:

The woman said to him, “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one they call Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one speaking to you.”

This is (intentionally) one of the most uncompromising statements in the gospel, “I am he,” echoes Deuteronomy 18, “The Lord your God will raise up a prophet like me from among your own people. You must listen to the prophet” But before the narrative can develop further, the story is interrupted by the return of the disciples. A sub-plot is allowed to develop, with Jesus not eating the food the disciples have brought him, and then lecturing them about ‘real food’, just as he talked to the woman about real water. But the woman leaves the story at this point, abandons her bucket (a

sign, therefore, that such material desires have been superseded,) and returns to her community to recount her tale.

The story ends as it began – with a tale of an unexpected encounter, with themes of taint, surprise and boundary crossing redolent in the text. A group of Samaritans now come to see Jesus, prompted by the un-named woman. This in turn prompts an excursus from Jesus about the harvest – a cipher for God’s abundance, but also judgement. But it is now obvious (if also perhaps puzzling to the disciples) that Jesus, throughout this encounter, is making a profound series of political statements about the nature of the kingdom and the Messiah. We can summarize these briefly.

First, it is God, who in Christ, comes to the Samaritans, and engages with them on their own territory and in their own idiom and dialect. Remember, this was not the obvious route for Jesus to take to get to Galilee – he chose to deviate, and allowed himself to be distracted.

Second, the message to the Samaritans is not ‘become a Jew like me’, but rather ‘there is a time when tribal boundaries will cease to matter’, and genuine faith will not be about which party, sect or denomination one belongs to, but instead be about ‘spirit and truth’.

Third, the striking particularity of the

story is its radical inclusiveness. As is so often the case in the Gospels, Jesus is fraternising with people that raise questions of taste, discernment and even purity. But Jesus is not interested in such outward judgementalism. This is all about grace – new outward signs of an invisible change. The woman leaves her bucket; that says it all.

Fourth Case Study

The Wedding at Cana-in-Galilee: (John 2: 1-11)

Finally, we come to the wedding at Cana, where I ought to start with a brief confession. I don't really like wedding receptions very much. Actually, I was at one recently for a good family friend (which was ok, by the way – no, actually quite good); but by and large, there are very few I have been to that I have really enjoyed. My own, obviously; but others? If I'm honest, they belong to my own personal Room 101 – in they go with caravans, any kind of camping holiday, semolina, junket, coconut...and quite a few hymns. So it is a bit odd to be standing here 'preaching' about a wedding receptions, but ...

As you have probably realised by now, God has a fairly warped sense of humour. I have only to reflect on the events surrounding my own call to ordained ministry to know that no matter how serious we are, God is

never very far away from breaking into a wry smile. I first twigged that I might be called to ministry when I was just sixteen – a rebellious, recalcitrant and slightly reckless youth. Perhaps not the quite the teenager from hell, but definitely one that knew how to put his parents through the proverbial purgatory. Despairing of their eldest, my parents made me sit a two day multiple choice career exam to help determine my future. The theory was that if I had a goal in life, I might actually take aim at something. And what did the random-tick-this-box-formula conclude lay ahead? [1] Possibly a career in teaching (this pleased me – a chance to get my own back on the system); and [2] become a clergyman (this horrified me: just how un-cool could this possibly be?).

But the second option stuck – it stalked me like the proverbial hound of heaven. I used to tell people what the results of the Careers test were, hoping that they break down into uncontrollable laughter, and persuade me that I was deluded. But people did not. They would say 'oh yes, I can see that', or 'I wondered when you'd realise'. There was no escaping the 'call', and I duly went off to read theology at University, and after a career in publishing, put myself forward for ordination in 1987.

Selection for ordination is an odd thing. My selection conference was at a retreat house in the aptly named village of Offchurch [more humour

from God here] – it sounds like an ecclesiastical regulator. Not happy with your vicar? Tired of paying high quotas to your bishop? Want to complain about the preacher? Write to Offchurch...

My conference went OK. I quickly realised that half the people on the conference were weirder than I was, so guessed the game was up, and that I would soon be swapping my lucrative career in publishing and my beloved MG sports car for the less attractive rewards of a stipend, and the dubious reliability of Fiat Panda. And so it came to pass.



I mention this only to remind you that God uses unusual, and perhaps even rather unpromising material for the priesthood, and to reinforce the point that God clearly has a sense of humour...

The idea that God uses fairly unpromising or unusual material to further his purposes should not surprise us. In the gospels, even mira-

cles begin with ordinary, simple things. A child's packed lunch – a very ordinary thing – needs to be prepared, packed, lugged up a hillock and then offered before anything can happen to help feed five thousand. To catch fish, someone needs to build a boat and make some nets. The miracle of the wedding at Cana in Galilee – a story rich in analogy and symbolism – is no different. But it is also packed with a telling litany of detail that should make us reflect a little more on our own place within God's world. Most people remember the story of the wedding of Cana in Galilee for the end result – an absurd amount of very good wine produced at the end of a feast in which, presumably, many have already had quite enough, and won't be riding their donkey's home.

But consider this. For the miracle of the wedding of Cana in Galilee to happen at all, two people have to take the risk of falling in love, and declare that they want to spend the rest of their natural lives together. To make water into wine, several people have to draw and fetch large amounts of water. To make the large huge jars which carry the water, and later the miraculous wine, someone has to dig the clay, stoke the oven, mould the clay and fire it. And someone has the final headache of organising a Jewish wedding and hundreds of guests. Without these 'base', ordinary materials, there is no miracle at Cana. We all have our part to play in the trans-

formations and miracles that are wrought of God.

And so it is with the church. The gospel reminds us that base, and perhaps rather unpromising materials, when offered to God, become transformed. Ordinary bread becomes the body of Christ; ordinary wine his blood. And yet it is important to remember that these materials remain as they are, even as they are transformed.

It is important to face this, because in a church that is sometimes obsessed with being pure and holy, we need to remember that there is no version of Christianity that does not have a local accent. Every type and form of Christianity is incarnated within its local culture – its time, its space and its life. The story of our faith is, in other words, a story of common, local water into wine – the transformation of what is base; but it draws out the very best of what that life or material is, to a new and redeemed status. Put another way, it is the blessing of reality. Our faith is just that. It is the taking of ordinary people – with their own special and unique qualities – and beginning to see that they can become instruments of God’s blessing to us. It is sacramental; the ordinary made extra-ordinary.

But, lest you need reminding, the ordinary remains, and for good reasons. God is reminding us that it is *here* that he meets us – in the plainest things: bread, wine...and people. Even wedding receptions. This is, of course, a very *Anglican* definition of miracles. If you like, ‘doing something quite interesting with something fairly ordinary’. For most Anglicans, such miracles occur with regular frequency in the Vicarage kitchen, or study. All too rarely, the same kind of miracle occurs in a consecration...but that’s really a subject for another discussion.

This why the Apostle Paul’s well-known phrase is so vital to remember, “His power is made perfect in our weakness.” We do not belong to a religion where power finds expression in perfectionism. Rather, we look for the God who is incarnate; who comes to the world, and is found in human form. God *uses* our weaknesses – the foolish and base things of the world – to effect his changes. But whereas we look for perfection, God looks for the weakness – he is drawn to it, because he seeks to not only change it, but actually to work through it.

As the mystics say, if God has a weakness, it is a soft heart – God cannot resist a challenge. There would have been people at the Wedding in Cana, therefore, who would be sipping the wine, but perhaps not agree-

ing with the Steward's verdict that the groom had 'saved the best until last'. You can perhaps imagine others muttering, "Well, he says its good, but personally I don't care for these new fruity Mediterranean wines myself. Give me a good Claret any day, or perhaps a nice dry



Burgundy.”

What then, are we to make of miracle of the Wedding of Cana? There is a sense in which we are often invited to look at these stories in other ways, apart from the literal. ‘Miracles’, you see, are not *descriptions* of events, but *interpretations*. You have to *look* for the meaning; you have to *find* the point; you have to *discern* the leaven in the lump.

Perhaps the **first** thing to say is that the story itself is a vehicle for a host of analogies. The performance of the miracle has something to say about the necessity of renewal; that the church is to be the new wine. That in Jesus, the time of celebration

has arrived. And that the Kingdom of God, now dawning, is a place of God's plenty. So often in the gospels, the meaning of a miracle is on the inside of the story, and not the outside.

Second, then, the miracle is a reminder of God's absurd abundance. His love and grace is not measured out – in ration book tokens, as it were. It is there for all in ridiculous, stupefying and intoxicating quantities. His love flows, flows and flows. This miracle speaks of his extravagant love and generosity. It says that even at a wedding reception, God lavishes his love on those whose gaze is wholly elsewhere. They are saying, “Ooh, I don't think much of her outfit – those colours really don't work.” Yet this is the time; the new wine is here, and it is being served now: even to those who don't notice. Ten lepers are healed; only one bothers to say thanks. But the other nine don't lose out. So it is with the wine; all may drink (and be merry), just as God's love and grace is for all. But only a few will notice that their taste-buds have been tickled, and then read the label.

Third, the miracle at Cana-in-Galilee is a definite echo of the resurrection story. The miracle at the wedding takes place on the third day. Out of the dry earth – whether a pot or a ‘hewn-out grace’, it matters not – new wine flows where there was nothing before. What was thought to

be water is now wine; this is the carpenter's son. Jesus is himself the new wine; the best of God saved until last. Down the ages the prophets have come – and gone. But the word of the Lord is now rare. It is not often that God's people sense the voice of God through God's anointed. All that was centuries ago. So just when you thought the party was all over, and about to end in a whimper, not with a bang, there is an unexpected coda from God. All is not finished. Actually, the party has just really started.

Fourth, the miracle invites us to consider how God uses ordinary material today – not just bread and wine, but people too – perhaps like you and me. How does God make the ordinary into something that begins to speak of transformation, overflow, grace, extravagant excess, lavish (even foolish) love? In her book *Travelling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes seeing a miracle at church, and it is one which rather surprises her. She relates how a member of the congregation, a man named Ken, was dying of AIDS – his partner having already died of the disease. She writes:

There's a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken...She was raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life – that

he – was an abomination...But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days.

So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn, the so-called Morning Hymn, we sang 'Jacob's Ladder' which goes, "Every rung goes higher, higher," while ironically Ken couldn't even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. And then when it came time for the second hymn, the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing 'His Eye Is on the Sparrow'. The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen – only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap – and we began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" And Ranola watched Ken rather sceptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up – lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And it pierced me.

And that's really all I want to say. If you want to see a miracle, you can help to make one. Make a pot; fetch some water; arrange a wedding; do all the ordinary things you normally do. But do these things with open eyes, open hands and open hearts. And ask God to transform the ordinary; offer yourself; and ask God to use your ordinariness, and perhaps your weakness. And just as God pours out the holy spirit, so will you also be poured out, in the most surprising and abundant ways, for God's sake, and for God's glory.

Summary:

Our four encounters today have all been about the transformation of material. They invite us to think about our lives, our buildings, our ministries and our identities. The gospels speak of the cost of encounter, but also of the miracle of grace – that God will use almost anything to reconcile the world to the divine. The world of conversion is indeed strange. It is only the lost who can be found; only the blind who can realise that they now see.

The Revd'd Canon, Professor Martyn Percy is Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxford. Copyright on this article is reserved to him.

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Justin Brierley is a researcher and broadcaster for Premier Radio who

has offered the following book review.

Was Jesus married to Mary Magdalene?

You are aware of the film version of Dan Brown's best-selling novel "The Da Vinci Code". And if you've been in the vicinity of a Christian bookshop, you've probably come across a variety of books called "Cracking the Code", "Debunking Da Vinci", "Dan Brown's Deception" or some other clever, alliterative title.'

So what's all the fuss?

At the risk of spoiling the plot for those who are planning to read the book, or see the DVD, Dan Brown's story is the adventure of cryptologist Robert Langdon and his female French sidekick as they dash from Paris to London and beyond in a quest for the "Holy Grail". As the plot unfolds it becomes clear that the Holy Grail is a cover for something rather different – a secret "royal" blood line descended from a supposed marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene and guarded by a secret order that the Catholic Church is desperate to wipe out.

The author Dan Brown has been quoted recently as saying that the Novel should be read as "fiction", but that hasn't stopped its claims from creating many column inches and planting more than a few seeds of confusion in the minds of his readers.

In my role as a presenter for Premier Christian Radio I was asked to look into some of the claims made by the book and film. I enlisted the help of Garry Williams, who has written an excellent, compact book about the novel called “The Da Vinci Code – from Dan Brown’s fiction to Mary Magdalene’s faith”.

As Garry explained to me, the controversial claims made by Dan Brown’s work are not new; indeed they have been floating around for centuries. In his book Garry debunks seven key claims about Christianity made by the novel, but here I’ll attempt only to clear up just one of them – was Mary Magdalene married to Jesus?

The claim is central to the plot of the book and the film. But the evidence for it is, quite literally, paper thin. In the book, Sir Leigh Teabing tells Langdon that the Gospel of Phillip makes reference to Mary Magdalene as the “companion of the saviour” and that he used to “kiss her often on the mouth”. Teabing comments: “Any Aramaic scholar will tell you; the word companion in those days literally meant spouse”. This is the only piece of evidence put forward because it is the only piece of evidence that exists in ancient literature.

So how good is it? The answer: not good.

Firstly, the Gospel of Phillip is one of the so-called “Gnostic gospels” written some 220 years after Jesus lived. It stands alone in making the marriage claim, compared to the accepted Gospels that were written within decades to Jesus’ life from eye-witness accounts. Which would you trust more?

Secondly, the actual claims made in the Gospel of Phillip are not clear. The text is fragmentary at best – it doesn’t in fact say that it was “on the mouth” that he did not kiss Mary Magdalene, nor would it have been unusual for believers at the time to exchange kisses of a non-sexual nature.

Thirdly, the word translated “companion” can mean spouse, but also a host of other things such as a business partner, or even a fellow murderer. To say that Mary was Jesus’ companion needs to say nothing at all about a sexual relationship. In short, there is absolutely no ancient evidence that Jesus was married to Mary.

To back up his claim, Teabing makes the assertion that no rabbi of Jesus’ day would have been unmarried – therefore, Jesus, by dint of social convention, would have had a wife. But again, there’s little evidence to support the claim. First, Jesus was not in any formal sense a rabbi – it was a title people used of a holy man generally until the office was formalized in

70 AD. Secondly, there was a clear precedent for holy men of that period not being married – the Essenes (in the tradition of John the Baptist) were noted for their celibacy in historical documents.

Ultimately, most of Dan Brown’s supposed, historical sources turn out to be more smoke than substance. He claims in the introduction to the novel “that The Priory of Sion” which guards the secret of the Holy Grail is a bona fide organisation with historically documented records (and Leonardo Da Vinci one of its Grand Masters). Unfortunately, Brown had been fooled, along with many others, by an elaborate hoax from the mind of a French’ fantasist called Phillippe De Cherisey, who admitted over ten years ago to forging the documents.

Of course, all this conspiracy and subterfuge makes for a great page-turner; and, with the film release, has netted Brown a considerable fortune. But when fiction masquerades as fact and people start asking hard questions about Christian faith; I believe we need to be prepared to answer them. See the film and read the book – but remember its fiction!

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And what follows is a suggested basis for discussion by teenagers:

The Da Vinci Code – What’s the all fuss about?

You would have to have been in a coma for the last five years not to have heard about the Da Vinci Code. The hype surrounding the upcoming film has reached fever pitch with TV programmes, newspaper articles and even competitions popping up everywhere. But let us save you the price of a ticket and tell you what it’s all about ...

It starts with the idea that Jesus did not die on the cross, but was unconscious and later rescued by His disciples.

Afterwards, Jesus married Mary Magdalene and had children with her.

Years later the Catholic Church is supposed to have edited the Gospels in order to present Jesus as God and not human so that they can gain power and suppress women by saying that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.

An ancient secret group, called the Priory of Sion, is said to know and protect the secret bloodline of Jesus, to have knowledge of ‘lost Gospels’ that were edited out by the Catholic Church and also to worship Mary Magdalene as a goddess.

Clues to this secret are supposed to be

hidden within the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci and certain ancient churches built by the Knights Templar.

The painting called the Mona Lisa is alleged to be Leonardo's portrait of Mary Magdalene and his painting of the Last Supper is said to show that Mary is the Holy Grail of legend (it's weird, I know).

Another secret group within the Catholic Church, called Opus Dei (it means God's Work) is said to have devoted themselves to destroy the knowledge held by the Priory of Sion and promote the 'official doctrine' of the Church.

So there it is, in a nutshell! But is it true? Consider these points:

We are asked to believe that Roman soldiers don't know when a crucified man is dead, even after they've stabbed him with a spear!

Would the disciples and the early church suffer persecution for centuries for what they knew to be a lie?

The 'Lost Gospels' quoted in the book and the film were written by a cult called the Gnostics, hundreds of years after Jesus' lifetime and do not have the historical accuracy of the gospels in the Bible.

Most of the 'facts' quoted by Dan Brown concerning the clues in paintings, buildings and ancient texts have been shown by non-Christian scholars to be historically inaccurate and misinterpreted.

Although Opus Dei exists, it is not a secret organisation. There is no reliable evidence that the Priory of Sion exists.

Perhaps it's best not to be carried away with the hype but look at all the evidence and make up your own mind.