

**A tribute and reflection for the launch of
John Hull's *Towards the Prophetic Church* (SCM, 2014)**

Some of us have been immensely privileged to learn our craft, as theologians and teachers, in close proximity to John. His performances in and beyond the classroom are frequently something of a masterclass in adult theological education.

Two days ago in this room John was addressing yet another new group of students. At the end of yet another dynamic and interactive class (on what we might learn from the different endings of the gospels - conducted as usual with the clarity, crispness and wit which make his teaching so effective), the students – Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal, Salvation Army - burst into spontaneous applause. Not many of us evoke that kind of response. Less still from people who may find our conclusions unsettling and provocative, but who nevertheless recognize profound intellectual rigour and integrity harnessed to the service of the kingdom of God.

John doesn't see all that others notice. Those who have the privilege of working with John in class are struck by the kind of rapt attention with which students hang onto what he has to say, as heart speaks to heart and minds spark with fresh perspectives on familiar scriptures... or when students begin to realize that the doctrine of the Trinity not only makes some sense but undergirds a full-bodied call to evangelical action - whether that action means firing off letters to MPs or tackling bankers on their resistance to the Robin Hood tax, or praying and protesting outside a factory which makes engines for military drones. Which is where John was on Friday. With students, once again. It's quite remarkable how effectively John manages to encourage and lead student ministers, including those who "don't do this kind of thing", over thresholds they cross with some trepidation - and from which many return with a sense of relief and with a fuller sense that this might be, after all, what the Lord requires. And therefore what the Church requires in its training of representative ministers.

Deeply realistic, John cites Reinhold Niebuhr's reflections on congregational life in 1926:

You can't rush into a congregation which has been fed from its very infancy on the individualistic ethic of Protestantism, and which is immersed in a civilization where ethical individualism runs riot, and expect to develop a social conscience among people in two weeks.¹

Reflecting on the experience of working with student ministers here at Queen's, and encouraging or cajoling them into faith-based public actions, John comments:

Our two most difficult problems are in overcoming the fear which prevents people from taking part, and the question of whether candidates will be able to lead their future congregations into such activity once they have been ordained and have left their training behind them. Already signs are appearing to suggest that some churches are changing.²

There are indeed signs that churches are changing, though no need to slip into generalisations about the expansion of Christianity or the renewal of the Church. What we can say with some confidence is that John is influencing the culture of church life, of Christian practices. His reach extends through students who have known him as teacher, through colleagues who have been influenced in their theology and their teaching, through church members and friends who at least occasionally ask, as John himself asks rhetorically, 'is there a future for the Church?' He goes on to say:

There will continue to be a future for the Church as the instrument of Christian faith as long as the Church is true to the Christian faith and Christian faith is faithful to the mission of God. However, one might imagine another future for the Church, a future in which it becomes the shrewd and hardened collaborator with the powers of financial oppression. Then the Church would no longer be the Church.³

¹ John Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p.183, quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, p.85.

² *Towards the Prophetic Church*, p.239.

³ *Toward the Prophetic Church*, p.208.

John has influenced a current mission debate which for the past decade or two seems to have been still preoccupied with the kind of questions which were shaping the practical theological agenda of a couple of centuries ago – questions of how to organise church life efficiently. By contrast, John lays on the table a category of practical theology and the teaching of mission which he has almost single-handedly discerned, shaped and tested: that of prophetics – the “theory and practice of the Church’s counter-cultural protest in the service of the Kingdom of God” (p.240).

The heart of many of the chapters in this book have been honed in the classroom or in public actions – as the book itself describes, not least in the concluding descriptions of the kind of mission-oriented theological education which John has been developing with others over many years here at Queen’s.

Perhaps we are still working out the full implication of what John writes so succinctly: “Without extending theology into action, the study of theology remains dislocated or ineffective” (241).

As John was teaching about the ending of Mark’s Gospel on Saturday, and about how the reader is left needing and wanting to move to where Jesus said they would meet him again, I was thinking... John’s new book seems to have that kind of effect too! In light of all that has been written here so convincingly, what then should we do? Where should we go?

To the question of what we mean by extending theology into action, John gives us a theory of action, and a detailed framework for prophetic action, and an outline for theological education for prophetic action. Reading, thinking and writing are also actions, of course; actions which John works to inculcate in others and which he models, with a passion for work which can take the breath away. So this latest book is *more than* (though never less than) a detailed study of the roots and branches of prophetic Judaeo-Christian traditions. It’s publication *is* in itself another prophetic action, designed to generate, extend and support further faithful activity. In much the same way that John expands worlds when he accompanies us across thresholds we might otherwise hesitate to cross, so this

book maps vast landscapes shaped by attention to the God of justice and love, restoration and re-creation.

Whether he would own it I don’t know, but John’s life and work seem to address us in deeply evangelical, expansively catholic, and richly charismatic ways. Those who have read John on blindness might also recognize him as something of a mystical theologian. Unafraid to wrestle in close combat with the divine, John challenges us time and again to show what it means to love the Lord our God with heart, soul, mind and strength. Full-bodied, as it were – and sometimes broken-bodied. Then he willingly gives his own answer, through a life lived to the full, deeply rooted, playful and serious, joyful and compelling. Clear and crisp and utterly hopeful.

Hopeful because relentlessly convinced that as church and as society we can be better than we often are. We can, if we pay attention, see more glimpses of that kingdom to which Jesus alluded. We can, if we choose, love one another as Jesus loves us.

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