

And finally

If this is the final episode (but no promises!) then presumably I'm going to reveal 'who dun it' or to tell you 'the answer'. Well, no, sorry, I don't have an answer, but I do know a Man who does. And that is where I'm at now, that is why I'm such a very happy chappy after these two years of exploration and discovery. OK, so what **have** I discovered?

Relationship, Trinity, relationship, community, relationship, love, relationship, reconciliation, relationship, adoption, relationship. And mystery.

Mystery because, after all, this **is** God we're talking about! While it's true that 'all Scripture is inspired...' the Bible doesn't just give us 'the answer' – rather it points us in the right direction, the One who is the way, the truth and the life.

Anyway, I'm happy that I haven't found 'the answer', because I've spent 48 years thinking I was 'getting it right'. The high (low) point of this was my time as a hyper-Pharisee in that sect, where we were so sure we were the only ones who had the true truth, and that the evil people around us were trying to draw us away. I was totally controlled by fear – fear, not love. (I'm comforted that my name-sake, also a hyper-Pharisee, turned out OK in the end.)

My exploration all started with one single sentence at the beginning of a Richard Rohr book: 'not **propositional** and **transactional**, but *relational* and *mysterious*'. Yes! I said, YES! **Exactly!** I had been taught right from student CU days that there was a set of propositions (e.g. the IVF Statement of Faith) that you had to believe, and then (and only then) you could 'become a Christian', 'pray the prayer', 'accept Jesus into your heart' – all describing the transaction that a person had (or hadn't) done – what one author describes as 'binary Christianity'.

So if that's what I've reacted **against** in myself, what's the positive that I'm moving towards (relational and mysterious)? Let's take mystery first. There's no mystery about mystery; it's just that God is so much ... 'more'. So at times (and I now have increasingly more time for those times – one of the joys of retirement) I just sit with God, and what an increasing blessing that is.

But the other aspect of mystery is that we'll never really get to know God, but that's OK. Faith says, 'I don't have all the answers, but I can trust God to reveal what I need to know, when I need to know it.' But I'm an inquisitive sort, so I keep searching to find out more and more about God, and what I find is good, very good.

So relationship? Well, that's also part of mystery – the two are strongly linked. But one plus of relationship is the way it helps us in our understanding of Scripture. I believe that this is what Jesus was trying to teach people, despite the Pharisees' best efforts. The Bible has to be interpreted, whether we're wondering what it says about long hair, women in church, divorce, chastising children, gender, homosexuality. But I think Jesus' attitude to Scripture shows us that if our interpretation hinders good relationships, either with God or with one another, then we need to look again at what 'we've always been taught', and maybe even bring in some of the secular, scientific wisdom that God has, I believe, allowed humankind to build up.

And relationship (and mystery) have affected the way I pray. For years, I've really, really struggled with prayer ... so do I now have the answer? No, but prayer is a relationship, not a

shopping list that you tick off once God has answered each item. And one big hint as to ‘how to pray’ is ‘**our** Father ... **our** daily bread ... **our** sins ... lead **us** not ...’ But this is very much a work in progress.

What about the people ‘out there’? What does relationship offer them? Today, so many people are lonely, and psychologists tell us that loneliness is the root cause of many other problems, and I’m guessing it affects physical health too. People are in desperate need of a caring community – I think that’s what’s behind the upsurge of things like choirs – and this morning I went to my first ever park run (I say ‘went to’, not ‘went on’, as – I was on childcare), and I found it quite moving, seeing all that community spirit. And there are apparently hundreds of these runs, all over the country, every week. Just brilliant! (Sorry, I got distracted. Where was I?) Yes, community. Our churches need to offer welcome, inclusion – on their terms, not ours. Church social events should definitely not (in my view) be opportunities for us to ‘preach the Gospel’!

Sorry, but I get really cross about this: (tell me if I’m wrong but) in our churches we’re told we have to ‘get alongside people’, we’re told we have to ‘pray for six friends’, so that we can have a chance to bring them to church, or to some event, where they can ‘hear the gospel’.

But then what is the ‘gospel’ that we preach; is it ‘good news’? The problem is that we think that to appreciate the good news, people absolutely must first understand the bad news of sin –

difficult in a post-Christian society. So what people hear is that we are emphasising the **BAD NEWS: God’s holiness, our sin, our separation, our desperate hell-bound plight**

without God ... and then we tell of the GOOD NEWS of God’s wonderful love as takes our sin upon him and dies and is resurrected, thus bringing us back to God, by which time they’ve quite understandably been switched off. As my Mum said repeatedly, whichever church we took her to, ‘Your church is always preaching hellfire and damnation.’ She, and millions like her, never get beyond hearing the bad news, and see us (and God) as judgmental.

I say that she ‘never get beyond’, but I really thank God for ‘Chorlton Good Neighbours’ in Manchester who, on a Tuesday, welcomed Mum into their church on her terms, offering companionship, shared interests – knitting, embroidery, etc. – taking her on outings and doing practical things for her. ‘Joining Good Neighbours was the best thing I ever did!’ she kept saying latterly. And they were absolute saints because Sue’s mother-in-law wasn’t an easy lady! She certainly never understood penal substitution,¹ but I have an inkling that she and I will meet again on that great day!

I trust I haven’t upset any of you by my outspokenness. My prayer is that we will all grow in our loving relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that many of those around us will be drawn into that wonderful relationship as a result.

Paul Bev. 03.11.18

¹ As I have learnt, penal substitution is just one of a number of possible metaphors for helping us appreciate the wonder and glory of what God in Christ achieved on the cross, so why has it become equated in our minds with ‘the Gospel’? How is it that a church can say that this one metaphor should be ‘the centre of [a church leader’s] theology and ministry’. I think it’s because we’ve lost our emphasis on relationship. Instead, we’ve ‘understood’ salvation, and found ‘the answer’: a simple, individualistic, mechanical view of atonement. (Sorry to go on about it, but it makes me cross.)