

## Telling it slant

### - Jesus as a spiritual director

*Following Jesus could leave even St Paul saying, 'now we see dimly'. It is altogether too wonderful and beyond human understanding to be reduced to questions and answers. We find ourselves in the quirky, even contradictory world of parables, led down apparent side tracks, losing and finding, as we trace the gifts and movements of the Spirit. Each relationship of accompaniment must find its own way of making this journey as we seek the wisdom and guidance of Christ together. We will be exploring this together in the context of the New Testament and our work and experience as spiritual directors.*

**7.00 pm** – Gathering Prayer and Welcome

**7.05 Reflection 1**

**7.30 Breakout groups**

**7.45 Feedback**

**7.55 – 9.05 Break**

**8.05 Reflection 2 'Now we see dimly'**

**8.30 Breakout groups**

**8.45 Gathering the fragments and prayer**

Thank you for inviting me

To hang my offerings on this evening I have borrowed the first line of Emily Dickenson's famous poem ...  
'Tell all the truth - but tell it slant

I want to explore what that means in spiritual accompaniment.

I will try to come to this from a variety of angles – it must include reflecting on the experience of *not* knowing, of *not* being clear, of seeing dimly, being in the dark - of holy mystery - the very necessity of this actually.

And how we faithfully inhabit this strange space in the work of direction.

It's a big topic for a very large group with a short space of time.

We will raise more than we can respond to this evening.

But rather than questions and answers it is probably more helpful to think of it as conversation starters that can and should take us in all directions.

I assume this is part of your experience or you would not be here this evening.

So I hope we can learn from the considerable experience and wisdom in this room.

Please take what is helpful and leave the rest.

There is no one right or wrong way of doing this.

*Feedback/comments and questions on chat – we will try and pick up as much as we can.*

**Slide 1:**

This picture that will accompany my slides

You may know it.

If this was you – what would be going on?

Is it a good place? What words or feelings describe it?

Just notice - not judging or analysing.

Let me give you a brief moment.

*Pause*

This picture accompanies me in ministry

Barometer of my moods and place in things.

Gold and swirlies – positive energy. God is around.

Shadows and out of focus – uncertain figure, which way to turn. Less certain, unsettling. Mystery.

In SD - this mix could be me – often is

Could be the person I am walking with.

Often both of us together

Sophie Hacker *Walking with angels*

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## **Part 1. Spiritual Direction as parable making**

You do not have to travel long in ways of prayer and spiritual life to discover that Christian growth – like life itself - is untidy, slow, inefficient, full of apparent detours, and frequently down-right contradictory!

If you are accompanying someone – you are expected to be the person with a clear understanding of what is going on – giving it clear direction. No pressure.

A personal story. Details changed to guard confidentiality.

Someone came to see me for spiritual direction. We met for the first time. After initial introductions I asked them to share what had brought them. A complex story unfolded – life had hit her hard, there was grief and hurt. God was part of the problem not the solution – and faith, as she had always known it, was now no help or made any sense. It was empty.

As she was speaking, I began to feel very tired. It was hard to concentrate. I felt a rising anxiety within me. It was potentially panicky. The concern was that I did not

know what I was going to say in response to her. A voice inside was saying – ‘Help! In a moment she is going to stop talking look at me expectantly - and she will expect me to say something helpful, wise and solve the problem. But I do not know what to say!’ I don’t understand what is going on’. I realised I was trawling through my memory for a bible text or wise sayings or a story to respond with. Anything but silence.

Actually, I find even when the relationship is well established that that anxiety can be around.

The thing is – once I am anxiously preoccupied planning what / am going to say, how / am going to sound, how to be wise and knowledgeable - I have stopped listening.

The focus is on me and my performance and reputation.

Even if I genuinely have some insights to offer – it can still be coming from that direction.

Each time this happens I have to be willing to lose myself in the *not* knowing – just let the currents of unknowing take us both where they will. I must surrender the role of saviour, guide, wise man, problem solver ... and trust that on the other side of this flood of uncertainty something would emerge for us both – or possibly only for them as far as I know. It is not for me.

A kind of self emptying – kenosis. Incarnation. Rather scary. Essential de-centring. The willingness to *not* know the answer.

I recall a tribute paid to Donald Winnicott, the pioneer child psychologist – a colleague spoke of ‘His monumental capacity to contain *unknowing*’

His willingness to *not* know – to dwell in that exploratory, empty, listening space – that was the key. The one thing necessary.

Jewish bible translator Robert Alter offers another version of this same challenge.

He complains that English Bible translations so often fail to faithfully express what the original Hebrew text is saying. A main reason for this is what he calls the ‘heresy of explanation’. Translators, like preachers, can be distracted with the need to make the bible – the faith - accessible and relevant instead of the primary task of representing it faithfully in another language (1998: xv). The very aim of making the bible easier to understand for modern readers can work against hearing what the bible is actually saying and how it is saying it. It distorts the word. The very strangeness of the text is part of its gift. It tells it slant.

If we cannot resist this temptation we will be forcing the bible text to be something it is not, to speak in a way it has not chosen to, to answer questions it is not asking – or has not even thought of. We will be making it a different kind of literature.

That is what led Alter to produce his own English interpretation of the Hebrew bible.

It is a temptation found in almost any aspect of Christian ministry, including spiritual direction. The heresy of explanation.

Alter is of course speaking from the rabbinic teaching tradition Jesus was formed in.

That is why Jesus mostly taught through stories - in Hebrew these are called *mashal* - they are almost any type of figurative language from short riddles to long, extended allegories. Mashal is "mysterious speech", often oblique. Indirect. Slanted. It comes to us round corners.

Can be very funny. Jesus's use of extreme opposites is one example. The tiny speck in your eye – the massive railway sleeper in mine ... Middle Eastern humour even today is based on extreme opposites.

Mashal shocks, offends, provokes, goads. Can be head scratchingly bewildering. It is often very playful and teasing.

We call mashal *parables*.

But this is misleading. In the Greek world *parabole* were simple methods of teaching open to point by point interpretation. This is too direct.

Mashal are not straight moral tales or sayings with the point at the end. Here ends the lesson.

We get parabola from the same word. An arc. This is a clue. *Mashal* comes to us as a curve ball - often intentionally confusing or deliberately obscure in nature. Catching us off balance.

A better Greek word for mashal would be *enigma* (riddle) – mashal are for "ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven" (Jesus in Mark 4:11-12). How enigmatic is that? There is a holy perversity about this.

What we need most is not answers or explanations.

For God is never so revealed as to obvious

Mashal is a way of teaching that works by first subverting what we think we know. Eluding our attempts to grasp it. It breaks up the mindset we come with. Shocks, confuses, muddles, contradicts, provokes, teases us .... It makes non sense. Makes new revelation possible.

Have you noticed how often the teaching and comments of Jesus leaves his hearers baffled. Scandalises some and absolute thrills others.

This was deliberate. His teaching is simultaneously a concealing.

"I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Matt 11.25

Not that Jesus does not want us to understand – rather it is the only way we can begin to truly understand.

But how often preachers have seen their task as explaining a parable when Jesus has gone to a lot of trouble to not do that at all. The heresy of explanation.

Any work of guidance, pastoral care, teaching and faith faces the same challenge.

So beware of thinking your work is to reveal. It may be the opposite.

The task is to suspend the urge to explain and let the story take us where it will. That includes the story the person brings to accompaniment.

This not only saves us from heresy, it is a lot more fun isn't it?

Spiritual accompaniment as play.

OK. Let's open this up together.

## Slide 2: Breakout groups.

Let everyone have a chance to speak.  
Every voice is welcome. No question is stupid.

Do you recognise this in any particular ways in your work of accompaniment?  
How does it leave you feeling? Notice your inner responses to this.  
Are you prone to the 'heresy of explanation'?  
What do you think it means to contain un-knowing in spiritual direction?  
What issues or questions does this raise for you?

Any particular questions or feedback - use chat

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Feedback – responses from David, Nick and Catherine

## Part 2. 'Now we see dimly'

Thank you for your feedback and insights.

**Slide 3:**  
Brief recap

Mashal. Parable. Parabola. Curve Ball – perhaps others have stood out for you?

Accompaniment as a de-centring  
The heresy of explanation  
Containing *unknowing*  
Accompaniment as a work of shared parable making ...  
Inhabiting the space faithfully

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A mashal warning in passing: Why you wouldn't want Jesus on your pub quiz team.

He'd either:

- a) answer a different question, the one they *should* have asked
- b) ask a question back
- c) tell a parable
- d) get thrown out for turning tap water into beer.

## Let's come from another angle

It is to do with the context in which we are offering the work of accompaniment and direction.

We do not operate in a neutral zone.

We are always part of a bigger story.

Even on our own we pray *our* Father – not *my* Father.

Christian faith is personal – but never private.

What is our context?

We are living in immensely unsettling and actually dangerous times in our world.

It is very hard to know what we can trust or who is telling the truth.

Many of us are also part of a deeply conflicted, exhausted and febrile church.

What is going to emerge is not clear.

We are entering something of a corporate dark night.

We do not listen well when we are fearful or anxious - and in the present world and church there is a great deal of both.

Something of this is always in the room when we meet. I am not sure how easily people are aware of this.

I bring it

Others bring it.

This would not surprise St Paul

‘Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.’ 1Cor 13.12

We should not be surprised then when SD feels like this.

It is not a failure of faith or skills or training. Though there is always more to learn.

But it can easily feel like that.

If our expectations are that this should be about being in the light, not in the dark; of vision not confusion; being found not lost; of presence not absence – we will be putting ourselves under great pressure – and takes us back to the personal story I began with.

Two ways of knowing in the spiritual life

### Slide 4:

**Kataphatic** - according to image. Helping people see.

**Apophatic** - beyond image – run out of words and imagination.

These two sit in creative tension.

We have to use words.

We try to create pictures – but it is always so much more

Apophatic is a greater revelation – not lesser  
Kataphatic – Franciscan, Ignatian, Evangelical/Protestant  
Apophatic – Carmelite, St John of the Cross, Cloud of Unknowing.

In the end all language is metaphorical. God simply beyond words and image.

It may be we need a renewing of the Apophatic way in a Kataphatic world and church.

It teaches us to guard and reverence the words we use.

The redeeming of language and imagination.

It guards us against presumption, idolatry and control.

It honours God's hiddenness and freedom.

'It is not surprising in a technological culture like ours that is obsessed with purpose and achievement, God has often been reduced to a useful predictable idol, or always experienced as absent. Jean-Jacques Suurmond. 1994:29

iv. The Apophatic way and renewal. Meeting God beyond all words and thought.

In an age like ours the permission to *not* to know and *not* see clearly might be a relief. The pressure to know, to be in control, to have answers, is, in the end unbearable.

Nor is our true vocation found here.

The *unknowability* of the God who is in our midst is the good news.

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Seeing dimly is biblical. It is an inescapable part of the way of faith.

There is mercy in this.

The main reason is that God dwells in inexpressible light.

So it must be told slant, says Dickenson - 'The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or everyone be blind'.

Corinth had a mirror making industry but Paul is not that flattering about it.  
Now we see obscurely, in partially – incompletely – he says – as in a mirror  
Not the full picture

Not the true image.

The Greek word translated as 'dimly', 'obscurely' is *ainigmata*. Enigma.

Enigma – "a person or thing that is mysterious or difficult to understand".

Paul is saying - 'now this is all an enigma to us'.

Not a failing. We are unfinished. Incomplete. This is beyond our grasp and understanding yet.

Beyond what we can yet take in.

But God is with us.

Back to our *mashal* world of faith seeking ...

Can you relate to that?

Being grown up, for Paul, means seeing less clearly, not more. Not just because we need glasses.

**Slide 5: Eugene Peterson** – one of the great pastoral and theological guides of our era and he said this near the end of his life ...

“I always assumed that as I got older, my faith would get firmer. That hasn’t happened. Jan [his wife] preceded me in this. A few years ago she began voicing doubts, a sense of what she called “absurdity”. Not crippling doubts, but no longer the childlike trust that she was accustomed to. And then it began happening to me. Not a crisis kind of thing but a nibbling at the edges. Instead of more, less. At least less of what I expected. Sometimes it occurs to me that it is my expectations that need converting, but so far that hasn’t happened. “

Eugene Petersen p289 *A burning in my bones*.

Such a relief to read this! If someone like Eugene Petersen finds fuzzy edges on his faith there is hope for me yet.

But I did not have to wait until I was older to experience this.

His point about our expectations needing converting. Feels significant.

Can you relate to that?

What are your expectations as you express this ministry?

Are they realistic?

Are they merciful?

Do they judge you or free you?

In the novel, *The Shack*, Mack is feeling judged and inadequate over his faith – judged by his own expectations of what he thinks he ought to as a follower of Jesus – judgment he presumes aligns with what he assumes is God’s disappointed view of him.

He is talking to God – who shocks him by saying

“I have no expectations of you”.

Mack just can’t cope with this. He *must* have. Surely as his disciple God expects things of him?

Or is this another way of being told – you are useless.

God responds again

“I have no expectations of you – but I am full of *expectancy* for you”.

Expectations always judge and weigh down.

Someone who is full of expectancy for us, believes and hopes in us and who we may become.

From a word that judges – to a word that opens life and faith to loving possibilities.

Spiritual accompaniment – Christ with us- full of expectancy

Now we see dimly

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that ‘in the journey of the soul, the Christian often travels fastest by night’.

In her wonderful book *Learning to walk in the Dark* Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of expectation that accompanied all in her church life - that real faith is, what she calls, "full solar spirituality". Lived in the full light of God. She notes how darkness has very little positive meaning at all. It is where the light is missing.

Darkness is shorthand for anything that scares us, that is lacking, and the list is long.

In accompaniment – we need to be aware of underlying fears of the dark behind in our questions and stories – and theirs. The things we claim clarity or certainty on can be attempts to hide from what we fear and avoid.

### **Slide 6:**

Some simple responses to seeing dimly - to being in the dark - borrowed from parts of her book and elsewhere. You may have things you could add.

1. when you can't see - stop and sit down. Until you get some sight.
2. give up trying to run the show. You are not in control. Nor do you need to be.
3. accept you might bump into some things that may frighten you at first. Not a place we have attentively explored before. We are meeting ourselves and life there in new ways. Do not be afraid. Welcome the stranger.

4. receive 'the sacrament of defeat'. Not condemning. Accepting where we find ourselves. Make this place our offering. Part of the reason we are here is because have been shaped by choices and events we cannot unpick. Some we made – others made by others – unsought and unwished for. 143

One of the core tasks in the midst of loss is to be faithful to it. Because there is no comfortable way of not knowing, of being lost we will tend to look for the quickest way out of it – and assume that is what Jesus wants too.

But it needs our time and attention. It must be given voice. What responses are appropriate in the presence of loss?

Grief, tears, questioning, lament, vigil, protest...? Curiosity, possibility, exploring ...

Necessary losses in the journey of faith

"O Christ my Lord, again and again I have said with Mary Magdalene, 'They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him'. And I have been desolate and alone. And thou hast found me again, and I know that what has died is not thou, my Lord, but only my idea of thee, the image I have made to preserve what I have found and to be my security. I shall make another image, O Lord, better than the last. That too must go, and all successive images, until I come to the blessed vision of thyself, O Christ my Lord." George Appleton

The sacrament of defeat

5. Ask the darkness to teach you what you need to know. God is as present in the dark as in the light. Day and night are both alike to him. He loves us. He knows what he is about. He makes all things new.

## Slide 7: Group time

Are there insights here you particularly relate to? Or that challenge you? Questions to ask?

Have you wisdom you would add from your own experience of accompanying in the dark or through enigma?

Might anything here suggest changes to how you approach accompaniment? If so, in what ways?

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Feedback

Closing prayers.

Merton Prayer

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think that I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know  
nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of  
death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face  
my perils alone.”

Thomas Merton

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind

Emily Dickenson