



T. F. Torrance: Reflections of a parish minister

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I am very happy to have the opportunity of representing parish ministers in this colloquy on TF and his – I quote – ‘career of unequalled distinction in academy and Church.’ The words are those of the late David Wright, another of my teachers at New College, in a lauration address in Edinburgh in 1996 when TF received his eighth honorary doctorate.

Similarly, Alister McGrath introduced his *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* with the words: ‘Thomas Forsyth Torrance is widely recognised, particularly outside Great Britain, as the most significant British academic theologian of the twentieth century, and is especially noted for his ground-breaking contribution to the study of the relationship of Christian theology and the natural sciences’. He goes on to refer to the 360 pieces which TF had ‘authored, edited or translated’ before his retirement – and the 250 further items added after he retired – all, as he suggests, from ‘[t]he most senior member of the nearest thing to a “theological dynasty” that Great Britain has ever produced’.

I would comment on two things from that quotation. One is the phrase ‘particularly outside Great Britain’, reminding us of the words of the Lord about a prophet receiving more honour outside his own country; the other is the encouraging word for someone about to retire from parish ministry in the assurance that retirement isn’t simply being put out to grass.

Before I come to more personal reminiscence, there is one other paragraph I would mention, quoted by Alister McGrath as an **autobiographical** memoir from TF himself. He referred to his own upbringing – in words which I believe give many clues about what made TF the man that he was and the Christian that he was:

Through my missionary parents I was imbued from my earliest days with a vivid belief in God. Belief in God was so natural that I could no more doubt the existence of God than the existence of my parents or the world around me. I cannot remember ever having had any doubts about God. Moreover, as long as I can recall my religious outlook was essentially biblical and evangelical, and indeed evangelistic. I used to read three chapters of the Bible every day and five on Sundays which meant reading through the whole Bible each year. My father who could repeat by heart the Psalms and some of the books of the New Testament (the Epistle to the Romans, for example) encouraged us children to memorise many passages of the Holy Scriptures which I greatly appreciated later in life. Family prayers led by my father on his knees and the evangelical hymns he taught us to sing nourished our spiritual understanding and growth in faith. I can still repeat in Chinese, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so’. I was deeply conscious of the task to which my parents had been called by God to preach the gospel to heathen people and win them for Christ. This orientation to mission was built into the fabric of my mind, and has never faded – by its essential nature Christian theology has always had for me an evangelistic thrust.¹

I was a student in the classrooms of New College from 1966–69 and made my way regularly to the classroom where the gowned Professor would deliver these lectures now published as *Incarnation* – and I think we are in Bob Walker’s debt for the huge labour of love in making these lectures available in print. It was with some degree of excitement that I obtained my copy a year past January and as I read through it, I found myself saying to my wife that I was enjoying reading TF more than when I was a student in the lecture-room! Here is thought-out theology, of course – but theology at the service of the Church and especially in relation to the ministry of God’s Word that is the essential task of the parish minister as a preacher of God’s Word. That has been my approach – serving in one parish for thirty-nine years. Many today downplay ‘the sermon’ as a means of communication – but what

does Scripture say? – ‘it has pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.’ No doubt we are to use modern means and modern approaches – getting to grips with PowerPoint has, I believe, enhanced my own preaching ministry in the last couple of years – but it is, in my view, the exposition and application of this Word that God has given us that is fundamental to the exercise of ministry in this or any age.

TF himself had that perspective – and that experience – through his parish ministries in Alyth and Beechgrove. McGrath writes of how TF, after his studies at Oxford, felt that it was ‘imperative to gain experience of ministry, in order to bring a serious and solid dose of reality to his academic reflection’ – and I recall how both he and his brother JB (whom we were also privileged to have at New College at that time) would sometimes stop to illustrate something that had been said from some experience in parish ministry.

My own connections actually begin with a family connection, in that my late father knew Tom when they were young men. My family upbringing was in Tynecastle Church in Edinburgh (now part of Gorgie Church), where my grandfather and father were elders. After the Torrances’ return from China, my father was one of ‘the crowd’ that included Tom and they were involved together in various Youth Fellowship meetings and activities. My father was therefore rather pleased when I began studies at New College under the same TF, where we first heard these lectures. (I remember being asked to speak on behalf of the final year at a New College dinner and referring to the fact that some lecturers had a habit of giving out duplicated sheets of their lectures – I said they rained down on us in torrents and torrents).

TF didn’t forget his students. I was at one stage enlisted back into leading Scripture Union camps and I remember taking the boys from Scoughall to Church on Sunday (at Whitekirk) – and there was TF at the door to greet people: one of the ushers on duty that day handing out hymn-books. He introduced me to the preacher of the day as one of his former students; and there didn’t appear to be any sense of incongruity about the fact that one of the world’s leading theologians was simply handing out hymn-books as we came into Church.

Some years later, we in Macduff had a Christmas service broadcast on television. On the day when the service went out, I was hardly back

at my manse when the phone rang and it was TF to say how much he had appreciated the service. Actually by that time his memory wasn't so good and he was asking, 'You were one of my students, weren't you?' But he did comment on the fact that I had used one of his own favourite phrases about 'Christ clothed with his gospel'. He pointed out that it was a phrase of Calvin's – and I don't think I did, but I might have replied, 'I know – it was you who taught it to me'.

That incident, I think, speaks of TF's continuing interest in his students. He wanted to equip us for that ministry of preaching the Word and caring for the people. That is one of my favourite quotations; it is from the frontispiece of a book on the twenty-third psalm, where it says: 'Fidelity to the Word of God and care for the people of God combine in a book which God will surely bless and use'. Surely that could be adapted to say that the same things – fidelity to the Word of God and care for the people of God are the things God looks for in his ministers. I believe he saw both in TF: a man who sought to draw out the meaning of what God has Himself revealed to us and who sought to relate the Word to the lives of real people.

McGrath gives us some insights into TF's own preaching from his Alyth days. Preaching on the words of 2 Cor 13:14 – 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you' – he concluded with the challenge:

There are too many people in the Church who are only religious. Their religion consists simply in a belief in God – and in the end it doesn't matter very much what God they believe in. Theirs is simply a bare religion with not much room for Jesus Christ in it. Why is it that so many people are apt to be content with a bare religion with only a creator for their God? Why is it that so many people in modern times are apt to be unitarian, whether in explicit faith or in virtual practice? It is because in Jesus Christ, *God comes too near them* – and they only want a God that is far-off and distant. It would spoil their selfish enjoyment; it would mean a radical alteration in their way of life; it would cost too much; hurt too much, to have a God so close to them that he had come down into the world and become man.²

We're told of a local farmer, John Welch, who had been converted through a D. L. Moody campaign; he asked TF to preach on Romans – which he did. He spoke of how 'Man stands as a guilty sinner before God – he is in the wrong – and the heart of God goes out to him in all his infinite love and mercy. [...] The cross of Christ means that God has paid all our debts himself – your debts and mine – all of them. He has given you a cheque covering all your debts – *but* have you gone to the bank and cashed it?'

Some elders approached him afterwards to ask – was he saying that all their Church work didn't put them right with God? McGrath comments: 'Torrance assured them that this was indeed his meaning – and that of St Paul. Yet it conflicted with the intuitive human feeling that religious activity was in some sense meritorious. Torrance would encounter the same difficulty later in his ministry, and would later use his experiences to illustrate the radical nature of the doctrine of justification to his students at New College'.⁴

McGrath writes about the period when TF was balancing the claims of parish ministry and a return to academia; he believed his basic calling was 'to be a theologian who could support the missionary and evangelistic work of the church.'⁵ He himself wrote, 'My ten years in parish ministry ... enabled me to think *theologically* and not pseudo-psychologically. Again and again I found that the fundamental theological questions were the very stuff of the deepest anxieties of the human heart, questions such as, "Is God really like Jesus?"'⁶ This was a question which seemed to have made a deep impression on him; it was asked by a dying soldier, Private Phillips, who was found by TF, the stretcher-bearer, and who asked that question: 'Padre, is God really like Jesus?' 'I assured him that he was – the only God that there is, the God who had come to us in Jesus, shown his face to us, and poured out his love to us as our Saviour. As I prayed and commended him to the Lord Jesus, he passed away.'⁷ [...] 'I discovered repeatedly that to minister effectively required a firm grasp of the gospel and of the theology of the incarnation.'⁸

I think it was JB whom I remember once stopping to refer to the manner in which ministers would sometimes stand up in the General Assembly and begin their contribution with something like, 'Moderator, I'm no theologian, but ...'. And he would point out that

of course a minister is a theologian. I've heard it suggested that such an outlook would be like a doctor of medicine approaching a patient with, 'I'm not qualified medically, but my bedside manner is good'! Doctrine and evangelism belong together, and it's interesting to find that a lecture of TF's on theology and science should conclude with what amounts to an evangelistic appeal:

How glibly and dispassionately we can talk about God and discuss whether or not he is the creator and ground of the universe! But it is quite another thing to hear God challenging us all in Christ to the Great Decision. [...] Jesus stands today as always in Pilate's judgment Hall, waiting for the verdict of the world: 'What think ye of Christ?' 'What shall I do then with Jesus who is called the Christ?'⁹

Such are the words of one described on the fly-leaf of *Incarnation* as 'One of the most significant theologians of the late twentieth century'.

I have perhaps strayed a bit from my remit of parish reminiscences. I have myself spent my whole ministry in one parish – which might not have been so – and it might have been due to TF. I've been clearing out papers and came upon an invitation to consider a vacancy in Kinross-shire which started with the words, 'I am taking the liberty of writing to you at the suggestion of Dr Torrance'.

Among other papers I found was this – *Urgent Call to the Kirk*. I can't find the date but I remember it as a paper circulated by four Moderators with the hand of TF evident in it. Written against the background of apparent Church decline, it finishes with, 'This call for a repentant return of the Church of Scotland to Christ clothed with his Gospel [there it is again] is unashamedly evangelical and theological, for the grave crisis facing the Church is essentially spiritual. Only through spiritual and evangelical renewal will the Church of Scotland meet the compelling claims of Christ upon it to carry the Gospel to the millions in our own land who have not been gathered into the fold of Christ but who are desperately hungry for the bread of life.' That Call also included, 'The re-evangelisation of Scotland is absolutely imperative. It is above all in the regular on-going evangelism of the parish and pastoral ministry that the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is

mediated to the people.’ That really sums up much of TF’s goal in his life as a theologian – and as a Christian who read through his Bible once or twice every year.

In *Preaching Christ Today*,¹⁰ he referred to his colleague, James S. Stewart who, he says, ‘expounded the Gospel in the Gospels in such a way that his students heard the living and dynamic Word of God for themselves. Not surprisingly many of them were converted in his classroom’. I don’t know if the same happened in TF’s classroom, but many of us are grateful for the influence he bore upon us as his students. His lectures were demanding but also stimulating, academic but also pastorally grounded, theological but also prayerful.

And, since it was his practice to open his lectures with prayer, I thought it appropriate to close this short piece on parish reminiscences with the words of a prayer printed on the back of *Preaching Christ Today*; it doesn’t actually say it was offered by TF, but I presume it was. It says:

Increase, O God, the faith and zeal of all your people, that they may earnestly desire and more diligently seek the salvation of their fellows through the message of your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Send forth a mighty call to your servants to preach your Word, and multiply the number of those who labour in the Gospel; granting them a heart of love, sincerity of speech and the power of the Holy Spirit, that they may be enabled to persuade people to forsake sin and turn to you. So bless and favour the work of your evangelists, that multitudes may be brought from the kingdom of evil into the kingdom of your dear Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Notes

- ¹ Thomas F. Torrance, “Itinerarium mentis in Deum”, autobiographical memoir, 1, quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 13.

- ² Thomas F. Torrance, sermon preached November 1940 [quoted in McGrath, p. 64].
- ³ Thomas F. Torrance, sermon preached 24 December 1943 [quoted in McGrath, p. 65].
- ⁴ McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance*, 65.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.
- ⁶ “Thomas Torrance”, in Michael Bauman, ed., *Roundtable: Conversations with European Theologians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1990), 113.
- ⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, “War Service: Middle East and Italy, 1943–5”, unpublished memoir, 49 [quoted in McGrath, p. 74].
- ⁸ See n. 6.
- ⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, “Science and Theology”, unpublished typescript [quoted in McGrath, p. 204].
- ¹⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today* (Carberry, Handsel Press, 1994).