

But even if the books are not in a sense comparable, they raise the question of what *bishops*, in particular, might need for widening their perspectives and challenging their compliance. That is particularly so since we have to do here with the bishops of a communion that has come to span a wide range of jurisdictions and embodying very varied ecclesial polities. What are the dilemmas which they navigate, often without noticing them? As a British Anglican Bishop, what am I to see in Jesus of ways of confronting empire and its legacy with integrity? And if I had done that adequately would I even be a bishop?

Admiring as I am of David Ford's achievement, and (still I hope after writing this) being within his circle of friends and conversation partners, I would nonetheless have preferred my fellow bishops to have been given something that was rather more of a challenge and rather less of a reassurance. But then maybe such a gift would never be on the cards, the donor perhaps sensing that it might cause too much trouble for the money.

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Ford's work inhabits the well-populated contemporary category of the 'theological commentary'. Thereby it occupies a space between the theological and devotional. Adjectives such as 'formational', even 'mystagogical', come to mind. He would help us hear the Gospel directly as an aid to our lives as disciples. To this end Ford intends the commentary to share with the Gospel itself what he calls John's 'deep plain sense', with its commonplace signs inviting us to a deeper level of meaning. Much of the commentary is Ford engaging in a close reading of the details of each passage. He would have us hear its stories in a matrix of allusions to the Old Testament, common human experience and the Synoptics (which he assumes John knew). The resonances therein are part of what the stories mean.

In addition, Ford discerns a common pattern whereby each passage discloses its meaning successively, in what he calls 'three waves', requiring of us the patience to listen, listen and listen again, so as to come to see Jesus in the greater light the Gospel provides. Who Jesus is, how the stories unfold, and what the shape of the disciple's life is, are all connected. The stories must be heard against the wide horizon of 'God and the world'. By this means we come to be invited by Jesus by hearing the Gospel into the 'abundant life', which is itself an important theme of the Gospel.

The most famous example of a Johannine commentary of a different sort is William Temple's *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, which puts Ford in none-too-shabby company. It, too, sought to come alongside the disciple on the way. Ford's method and circumstances are of course different. But I do wonder if there isn't a kind of family resemblance, perhaps unintended, a certain inherited Anglican



feature to the book. As Michael Ramsey described it, Temple's was the culmination of a broadly 'incarnational cast of mind', beginning with the Word that is a light to everyone coming into the world (1.1, 9), and culminating in Jesus, by whom God reconciles the world to Himself. Ford's appeals to the 'abundance', 'light' and 'glorification' – legitimate Johannine themes – all head in the same direction.

David Ford has all the requisite learning, and has read more modern theology than is good for one person. But he wears his erudition lightly. The book has few references to the classic commentaries. He does not engage the pressing questions of previous eras, for example, the Logos' relation to roots in Gnosticism or Jewish wisdom literature. In fact, he intends to circumvent the usual interlocutors, but cites a more contemporary and eclectic circle, including recent female interpreters, the Scriptural Reasoning circle, Jean Vanier, and poets including Levertov and O'Siadhail. These might seem idiosyncratic, but in fact make sense given the kind of commentary he means to offer. He engages the important issue of Christian anti-Semitism directly and compassionately. The major figures in the Gospel's history make scant appearances, so, when they do, Ford has a reason. He reverts several times to his worry over predestination, as well as the theme of decision (for example, in Bultmann). The reader is left wishing he had engaged with the received tradition on these points in a more detailed and extensive way.

Life, love, glory, light, dwelling, mutuality: the commentary is most at home with these truly Johannine expressions of illumination. They are appropriate to the devotional, formational purpose of this work. But what if we were to start elsewhere, with the word of Jesus from the cross, 'it is accomplished'? Agency in a narrated event conveys, more readily, finality and uniqueness; this is a lesson of Hans Frei, a crucially important voice for Ford in modern theology. Likewise, the sacrificial implication of the Lamb of God slain for the Passover has this same feature of a deed accomplished 'once for all'. These require grappling with the atonement traditions in Christian theology. We may indeed come to see the work of the Crucified and Risen in wider ways, but the door to pluralism is closed by this 'agency-in-accomplished-event dimension'. I am not suggesting that Ford would deny any of the stronger doctrinal claims entailed in the finished work of Jesus, but rather that which themes a commentator foregrounds, affect for what he/she must then compensate.

Ford's work is a valuable contribution, and doubly so if one understands the kind of commentary it seeks to be. It is true that the world is God's, and in the incarnation He 'comes to His own' ultimately to abide. But at the same time John includes a sense that, in the wake of sin, 'the world' is sharply at odds with its Creator. The falcon cannot hear the falconer. The death of the Son cracks earth's most sacred place in two. Blessed abiding will look for Peter-like crucifixion upside-down. This theme of discontinuity is the aspect of the Gospel of John which poses a challenge to Ford's hermeneutic. Both strains are of course to be found in the Gospel. One could make a case that our time is in need of the dialogical, Temple-esque side, the invitation to 'abundant life'. But it yearns for the apocalyptic voice as well.

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