
Theological libraries : Meeting Angels?

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The following is an edited version of Dr Garrett's keynote address to the ANZTLA Conference in Canberra, July 2002.

The associated paintings, to which he refers, are included in the colour centre spread of the newsletter.



A theological library is to the church what memory is to the individual. Were it not there, were it to be damaged, or lost, or impaired, the church would lose a great deal (not all, since the church has other forms of collective memory) but a great deal, of its sense of identity through time. The library holds, nurtures, transmits, and guards the story of our life as Christian communities.

Without our libraries we would be hopeless amnesiacs. You, the librarians, are the keepers of our memory. In that sense the keepers of our identity as people of God.

And a theological library is to the individual believer what food is to the body. The movie *Babette's Feast*, based on a story by Karen Blixen, is the tale of a woman who, through a range of circumstances, provides a most marvellous feast for a rather uptight religious community who have never dared to eat or drink more than a very spartan kind of diet.

Babette turns on this brilliant, rich, endless, unimaginably succulent dinner, with wonderful wines to match. The little group can hardly believe what they are tucking into. This is food beyond their wildest dreams.

So too is the theological library to the searcher. Looking back across my own journey of faith I realise what a 'Babette's Feast' is held within the quiet walls and shelves of the library. Here the wealth of the faith is served without fuss or pretension to any half-starved believer like me who didn't even dream of what was possible.

I want to look at the place of theological libraries in the life of faith through the perhaps unusual prism of Mary, the mother of Jesus. My mind was stirred in this direction a few weeks ago when in the liturgical cycle of readings we came to the story of the ascension of Jesus as told by Luke in Acts 1.

Jesus and his followers are on the Mount Of Olivet after the resurrection. He gives them some instructions about the mission of the church and then is taken from them into heaven. They're left there bewildered, bereft and uncertain of what to do now.

Looking back we realise this is the moment of the birth of the church proper. This is the time when the community of faith has to take up the challenge

of being witnesses in the world to what God has done in Christ.

They run back to Jerusalem and, the text says, entered an upstairs room to pray and talk. The text gives a list of blokes names: Peter, James, John. The usual suspects. And then it adds, "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus ... ". Mary was there at the very birth of the church. This little footnote, as it were - I hadn't seen it!

The New Testament has a number, not great, but a number of these references to Jesus' mother, and her place in the story of Christ's mission in the world. The artists of the church across the ages have not missed these references, as I tended to, perhaps because of my protestant upbringing.

Seen in Mary is the example of faithful life in response to Christ. And still more, she is an example of a type of the life, ministry and mission of the church of Jesus in the world.

I want to look at four moments in the Gospel that describe Mary in relation to Jesus.

1. Annunciation.

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said: 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you'."

Mary is there right at the start of the whole story of Jesus' life, ministry, and mission.

Gabriel appears to Mary and presents her with this extraordinary challenge: to become the bearer of Christ, the incarnate son of God, the bringer of the salvation of God into history in a new and comprehensive way.

It is a dramatic moment. No doubt about that. In Fra Angelico's Annunciation (Florence, ca. 1449) (see picture 1) the

moment appeals to the artist. Here is the meeting of heaven and earth. The angel is a go-between between God and humanity, represented in Mary. The angel is half-human, half not (symbolised by the wings). He is from the realm of heaven, but entering the realm of earth. Human and not human.

In the painting the angel has wonderful colours. His stance is leaning forward to the task: intent, urgent, confident, articulate. He knows what he's there for and what message he has to give.

Mary is stunned. She is wondering, fearful, surprised; not quite believing her eyes and ears. But she is interested. 'Will I let myself get involved with this amazing, harebrained scheme?'

We know her answer. What would history have been if she had said 'No' - which she could have?

This picture is us too. Lesser of course, but analogous. There are moments when the challenge of God confronts us, as a church and as individuals. Will you take me into your life? Will you risk bearing me? Carry me? Introduce me into this part of the world where you live? It is risky, as for Mary. We don't know where it will take us.

This is a picture of what the church tries to do week by week, through sermons, through its life in the world. This too is a picture for the library.



Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith* is, for me, an angel on the shelf of systematic theology. This is one work that

turned me into a theologian and saved my faith. It was not big, like Mary's encounter, but big for me.

Every day of the year this happens in our libraries. People meet angels. The call of the Lord is heard in new ways. The challenge is there.

The library preserves stories of a thousand annunciations like this. Augustine's confessions. Luther's encounter...over

with Romans. Julian of Norwich's vision. Here they are. The presence of angels in our midst. They can and do speak again.

In a sense the theological library is an angel in waiting, wings folded for the moment, but waiting to fly. The library exists in the world as a present possibility of meeting between heaven and earth.

You are the tenders of the angel.

2. Mother and Child

There are literally hundreds of pictures of the Madonna, in various poses. This one by Gerard David (ca. 1510) (see picture 2) is of the flight into Egypt.

In Matthew's Gospel, after the wise men depart, an angel appears to Joseph and tells him to take Mary and the child to Egypt to avoid the death threats of Herod.

We don't have a great deal of information about Jesus' childhood. There is this story, and the story of Jesus' debates in the temple and his parents' anguish that he seemed lost.

Artists seek to capture something of the momentous quality of that period of Christ's life and the part his parents played in it. There's something very fundamental about this kind of picture. It goes to the very heart, the essence of a mother's love toward the child and the child to the mother. It is the centre piece of human generation, continuation of race, culture. Without this there is no humanity.

Here is Mary: gentle, protective, fascinated, watchful, concerned. And the child, looking forward, away from her, outward into the world. We see the donkey, trees, rivers, cities, houses. There are grapes to enjoy; all possibilities of future: life, work, words.

Also we see a terrible destiny, foreshadowed by darkness. The symbol of the grapes foreshadows his death. Mary is overarching, present. She is dedicated to nurture. She teaches, loves, assists and supports the child in life and destiny.

Joy, quietness, peace. This moment is,

again in a derivative way, our moment too. If the angel is the call, this picture captures something of what it means to answer in the affirmative.

These are the moments when we, individually and even more in community, suddenly realise anew what a treasure of grace is in our hands; what a potential for good and justice, hope and for reconciliation, for challenge and possibility, is right here in our midst. We have hold of it; have nurture of it; have part of it; have in a kind of a way the responsibility of it; we stand behind it; direct it out towards the world; launch it into new situations.

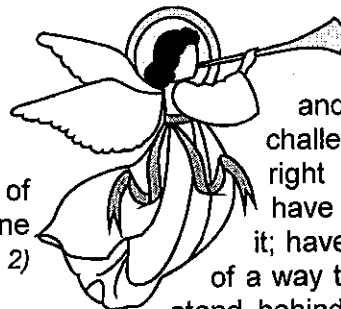
This is one strong image of the theological library. It is one way that we care for, nurture, protect, prepare for the work of the Gospel in the world. We remember Julian of Norwich's remarkable vision of the hazelnut, which she held in the palm of her hand.

"And with this insight he [God] also showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It seemed to me as round as a ball. I gazed at it and thought, 'What can this be?' The answer came thus, 'It is everything that is made.' I marvelled how this could be, for it was so small it seemed it might fall suddenly into nothingness. Then I heard the answer, 'It lasts, and ever shall last, because God loves it. All things have their being in this way by the grace of God.'" (Revelations of Divine Love, Chapter V)

For Julian the hazelnut (like the mustard seed in Jesus' parable) somehow stood for, even contained, the whole of being. It looked so tiny, so limited, so fragile.

Suddenly, it seems, it could just fall into nothingness. And yet its being is secure and its meaning of utmost importance, because God loves it. And God's grace is with it.

These sorts of thoughts must have been with Mary too, don't you think? This tiny



child, helpless, dependent, vulnerable; but also my child; and also loved of God; and thus part of the work and redemption of God in the world.

So too the hazelnuts of our libraries. Mountains out of molehills! Sometimes they don't seem to look like much - tiny, understaffed, under resourced, could fall into nothingness - And yet they contain and nurture a treasure. The treasure of the word of God, with all the potential that that holds for the future. This is part of your work. And it is loved of God.

3. Pieta

In Michelangelo's Pieta (St Peter's, Rome, year) (see picture 3) we see every parent's nightmare. Mary is cradling her dead son, taken from the cross. This is rooted in the story of the passion. Almost all friends forsook and fled; only a few women stayed to the bitter end, including Mary. His passion 'pierced her heart like a sword'.

We witness the pain of the mother in the presence of suffering and brutal death. Mary is there, doing what she can: strong, courageous; determined.

This also is us; again on a much lesser plane, but true nonetheless. At times we probably all felt like this in our faith and work. We've given it our all and look at the outcome. Of course, we are aware that this situation is part of the very fabric of Christian life in the world.

Times of agony. We know - if from no other source than reflection on the life of Mary's dealings with Christ - to follow Christ is to take up the cross. This journey took her to dark places, moments of disappointment, agony, grief, loss.

It must have seemed as if the whole thing was a failure and a tragic one at that. All those hopes in the angel, and the child, come to this.

Would Mary have said 'Yes' to the angel if she had known this?

There are elements of this picture in our libraries as well. Now I don't really want to

be so crude—well wrong—as to suggest that the agonies we go through in trying to "make do" in our libraries, often with scant resources and shrinking budgets, so that the work is hard and often frustrating.

This is true for many of you. No easy task. Sometimes there is a painful gap between what we can see we need and what we are given resources to do.

There is a tendency sometimes for us to speak of the pains and frustrations of life as 'our cross', at best analogy and at worst wrong. The cross we are called to bear is the suffering in the world that comes to us as opposition to our representation of the kingdom of God for Christ's sake. He suffered opposition for the kingdom, as he represented it. This is weariness from the daily routine of life, not the cross in this theological sense: privation or persecution for God's sake is.

That said, the church does face this reality in its life. Christian faith is not the 'house opinion' of contemporary Australian life and culture. We are more marginalised than we have been; public opinion is running more against us than at other times (some brought on ourselves).

There is a cost in trying to represent Christ's cause in the world, and to the extent that *that* brings pain and privation, something of this picture is ours as well.

But our libraries hold a great deal of this picture in their walls. The theology of the cross is a huge part of the content of our collections.

I recently received a letter from a young minister in rural NSW. He described how he had recently had to minister to a family who had lost their a child because of the wildly improbable circumstances of the child swallowing a small plastic toy and it getting caught in the oesophagus and eventually choking him.

He wrote about the parents' anguish and about his own struggle to try to offer a ministry of hope, healing, resurrection. And he asked if he could come and talk with me about it. He said, "I need to have references, some readings, that ...over

can help me make theological sense of this."

Now this is *this* picture (the *Pieta*). Where can we find courage and perhaps some understanding of this? Libraries are a huge repository of help in the valley of the shadow of death. Many Christians, from Mary onwards, have faced and lived this sort of pain. They have left behind for us some light, some hope, some comfort that we can now draw upon and without which we would be much poorer.

Of the many examples, I think of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the writings of this great saint, born from his struggle with evil, torture and death for the sake of the Gospel. Here I meet someone who knows what it is like to stand in the place of the *pieta*, but to stand here in faith.

4. Ascension

As I said at the start, the story of the ascension of Christ is the moment of the birth of the church. Jesus is gone from this world to God. The disciples are left puzzled there alone to work out what is to happen next. Mary is at prayer.

I can't find a picture of Mary here, but I do have Durer's image of the praying hands. (see picture 4) This part of the story Mary follows through with the great mission of Christ, started way back with her encounter with angel so long ago. She never dreamt what that angelic invitation would mean; if she knew would she have agreed? No?

She here sees it through, part of the community of church at prayer at the very start of its mission in the world. Perhaps this is the most comprehensive picture for our purposes.

Theological libraries can be and are places for meeting angels; aspects of the churches nurture of the gospel in the word; places of refuge and help in the face of deep sorrow and struggle when all around is seems to be in ruins and pain overwhelms us.

But maybe above all theological libraries are about this: the prayer that accompanies the mission of the church in the world. How are we to be the church in the world? How are we to worship God in the world? How are we to proclaim the message of grace in the world? How are we to be what Paul calls ministers of reconciliation in the world?

Nowhere in all the wide annals of the church, are these questions addressed with such imagination, depth, responsibility, and rigour as they are within the walls of our libraries. Here is the great deposit of the churches' effort to think out what it means to be disciples of Christ in the hugely diverse contexts of human life in time and space.

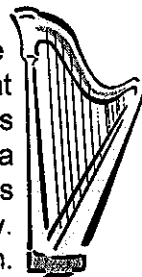
We cannot know how the church has tried to be the church, how it has succeeded and how it has failed in the past, without what is housed and cared for in our libraries.

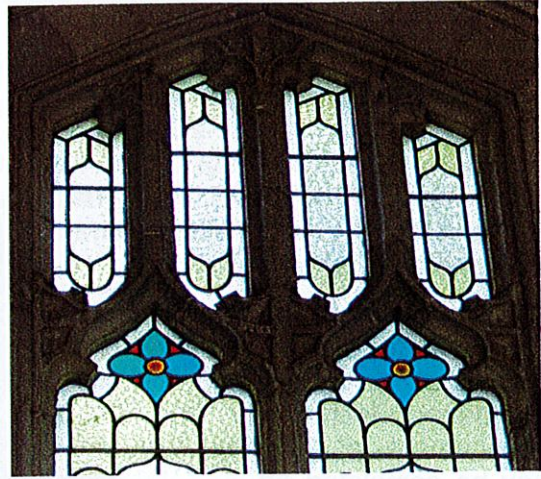
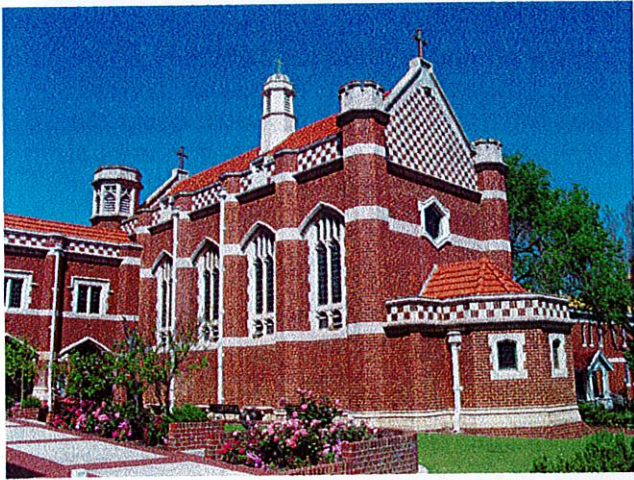
We cannot know how the church is presently trying to be the church and how it is succeeding and how failing, in other parts of the world, without the reports of these actions collected in our libraries.

We cannot begin to think responsibly about how we should be the church, or evaluate how well or how poorly we are succeeding in our attempts, without the critical materials on Bible, history, theology and praxis that our libraries put at our disposal.

This is the possibility that your work keeps present, alive and accessible for us every day of the year.

It is no accident that artists, following the New Testament, see Mary as a great example of what church and faith is about. Mary's moments with Christ are, at a lesser level of course, also ours individually and as community. Call; nurture; suffering; mission. These moments name what we are as Christians. These are the moments that our libraries, your libraries, foster, care for, make available, encourage us.

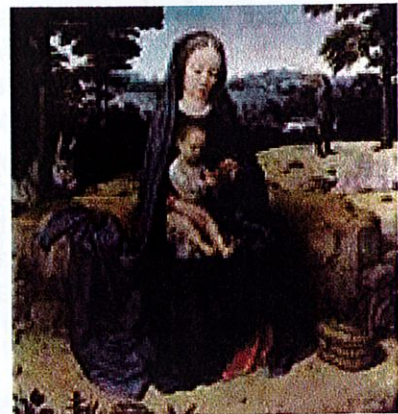




Perth College Chapel



Picture 1—see p. 7.



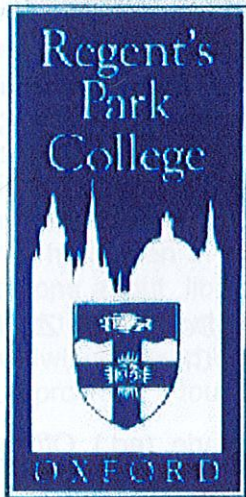
Picture 2—see p. 8



Picture 3—see p.9



Picture 4—see p.10



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