

Mulling over the Ephesian metaphors

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Date: 19.07.2010

Category: Ephesians Study, Scripture

The Ephesians Study Plan encouraged us last month to become aware of the images and metaphors in Paul's letter. This might be one of the most important bits of 'marinating in Ephesians' that we can do, because metaphors function at the level of our imagination and it's in our imagination that the process of transformation begins. Our imagination engages the cogs of our will to bring about transformed behaviour and attitudes. Jesus loved metaphors and so did the Old Testament prophets. They knew their power to expand people's limited imaginations or straighten out distorted understandings. They knew how metaphors enable people to glimpse another reality.

Eugene Peterson, in his memorable extended reflections on Ephesians (Practise Resurrection, Eerdmans 2010 - helpful reading in preparation for the Lausanne Bible reflections) warns us that, 'Literalists, maybe especially religious literalists, have a difficult time with metaphors. A metaphor is a word that makes an organic connection from what you can see to what you can't see. In any conversation involving God, whom we can't see, metaphors are invaluable for keeping language vivid and immediate. Without metaphors we are left with colourless abstractions and vague generalities.'

Elna Mouton, a South African biblical scholar, in her thought-provoking book on Ephesians, Reading a New Testament Document Ethically (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), describes metaphors as 'important - albeit often hazy - windows through which the moral world of a document can be investigated...' She refers to Paul Ricoeur's work (perhaps the outstanding thinker on the role of the imagination in developing faith): 'the communicative, transformative power of a text lies in its ability to suggest, to open up, to redescribe, to facilitate, to mediate, to make possible, to produce a world in front of it - a "proposed world" which readers may adopt or inhabit...Metaphors, parables and models are...instruments for the redescription of reality of lived experiences, which break up inadequate interpretations of the world and open the way to new, more adequate interpretations... Metaphor permits people to see new connections in things, or as Ricoeur puts it, to "decode the traces of God's presence in history".'

When we think about the Bible's powerful ability to expand our imagination, few of us have the New Testament letters in mind! We tend to forget their nature as human, pastoral documents. We receive them as theological treatises, flat text on the page, forgetting that they were listened to as 'performances', probably recited from memory by the person bringing them, in front of their intended audience. In such performances, Paul's metaphors were crucial for communicating key ideas that he wanted people to remember.

So... the Ephesian metaphors - birth, dividing wall, body, growth, armour and so on - all offer opportunities to expand our imaginations and reject 'a world that is organised in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos' (Brueggemann's Finally Comes the Poet, Augsburg Fortress 1989).