

# In the beginning was the Word..

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being through him is life, and the life is the light of all people.  
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

from John 1.1-4

Alison Morgan

We live in a visual world, a world not of word but of image, a world in which even in interpersonal communication only 7% of the information we take in comes through words. It's a world in which picture is paramount - it's been said we are all 'screenagers' now. And yet as Christians we have inherited what's been called a spirituality of print, a spirituality whose primary source is an ancient document containing, in English, some 788,280 written words.<sup>1</sup> Is it any use, in a world where image rules?

## The power of image

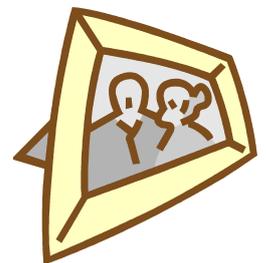
The first country to realise the power of the broadcast image was Nazi Germany, which developed the first state television. The most recent is the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan which, since becoming the last nation on earth to turn it on in 1999, has seen its traditional culture and spirituality washed away by a wave of crime, consumerism and family breakdown. And yet without television the Berlin wall would still be in place, and the hunger, poverty and suffering of the two thirds world would probably not be very high on the western agenda. We see the same pattern at the microlevel. Advertising, now the fastest growing form of communication in the world, landscapes the mind, emotions and aspirations of millions of people, and it does it, for good or ill, by harnessing the power of image. We live in a world where people believe things, want things, and care about things because they see them.

So, where does that leave us as Christians? Is our dusty printed Bible any good to us? It seems a funny kind of map to take with us on a journey through the fast-moving, multi-visual world we now live in.

You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisation to pieces, turn the world upside down, and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature – Mahatma Gandhi

## The frame and the picture

Let me invite you to think visually for a moment. Think of your life as a painting. You have a broad canvas, on which all the elements of your daily existence are sketched against the backcloth of the world you inhabit. Your workplace is there, the supermarket, the internet and the M25, Starbucks, Microsoft and Channel Five. And in there too are you, with your family and your friends, your faith and your church. Round this painting is a frame. It's a nice frame, a strong wooden one, tinged a pleasant shade of primrose. The only problem with it is, it doesn't fit the picture very well, because the picture keeps wriggling. Little ripples of tension run across the canvas, the frame shifts, and minute cracks appear.



So what do you do? Well, you live in a world that has painted this picture for you - a world that has landscaped not just your life but also your mind. It's given you a frame to put round the picture, a set of assumptions about how things should be, about what's important. The trouble is, the picture keeps changing, and the frame doesn't really fit. You struggle to adjust it, hoping no one will notice; but somehow it doesn't quite seem to work.

Every culture has a worldview, which fits like a frame round the picture of our lives. Worldviews don't last all that long; they always contain flaws which sooner or later get them chucked out - and the reason everything seems so transitory at the moment is that we are in the process of inventing a new worldview. How then do

we stand back from the picture and evaluate our worldview, examine this frame which looks good but rubs and pinches in all sorts of painful ways? We turn to the Bible, our dusty collection of printed words.

It is impossible to enslave mentally or socially a Bible-reading people. The principles of the Bible are the groundwork of human freedom – Horace Greely (1811-1872), an American newspaper editor.

The Bible is an astonishing document. It contains history, poetry, story, riddle, proverb, myth, law, prophecy and a rollicking collection of biographies. And it provides a framework of its own - a framework which consists of God himself, creator and redeemer of this muddled world, the one who first spoke it into being. What are the tensions in the human condition? What's God's perspective on what we're doing? It's in this book. And on the microlevel, what is the way to live a fulfilled life? To tackle problems? Measure success? Access the future? Handle conflict? Connect with reality? It's all in there. By filling our minds with the Bible we learn to sit light to the packaged reality of the latest worldview, the world of pre-wrapped values and manacled desires. Think of the prophet Jeremiah, crying out against materialism and false spiritualities, railing against a society which oppresses other nations and fails to care for the disadvantaged.<sup>2</sup> Think of the writer of Ecclesiastes, with his expose of worldly vanity; or of Revelation, with his grandiose vision of the future. Think of Paul, with his practical advice on common life issues, or the prophet Isaiah, with his dreams of water flowing in the desert. Read God's promises, his warnings; get in touch with his love, dream his dreams. The Bible offers us a mental and spiritual detox. It offers us a way of filtering the voices that fill our heads, a way of touching base with the God who alone can see beyond the frame.

## Nurturing the imagination

I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world - Albert Einstein

For 300 years now we've lived in a world where science has been the arbiter of reality. But even in science, the greatest leaps have always been made by those with the greatest ability to see outside the commonly accepted worldview - by those with the courage to dream. And dreams are usually visual. Perhaps that's why Jesus taught in parables, little riddle-stories which weren't really meant to explain things so much as to make people think a different way. Perhaps it's why he said we were to be salt and light to the world we live in, why he painted pictures of mustard seeds and nesting birds, hidden pearls and growing yeast. And perhaps that's what we're meant to do too. Winston Churchill once said 'the empires of the future will be the empires of the imagination'. The imagination works through image. And image is the province of the arts, media and entertainment industries.

Most people think of Jesus, in so far as they think of him at all, as a great teacher. But if you read the gospels you find that Jesus asked far more questions than he gave answers. He wanted to make us think. It's a great mandate. Now as never before, people think with their imaginations and with their emotions. So, if you work in arts, media and entertainment, it's your job to ask questions everywhere you go - little questions, big questions. It's your job to touch the heart, to stimulate the imagination. To be Jesus, to shed light into darkness. To help people see that the pinching, chafing frame from the chainstores isn't the only one on offer. To stimulate their imaginations. What's the best way of doing it? It's to immerse yourself in the most radical document ever written, and absorb its craziness, its dreams, its hopes, its warnings. To rely on the Holy Spirit to work in you and through you, to bring life through your words and images as he brought life to the universe through his. This is a world that wants to dream of Middle Earth, that queues up to see the March of the Penguins. Why did we like *Chocolat*? What chords were struck by *The Pianist*? Perhaps the best films are parables, parables of life which take us out of ourselves and point us towards God.

The way we define art has the power to shape our culture – Charles Colson

## The Word of God at work

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Why did Jesus work this way, telling stories and asking questions? Perhaps to show us that if you want seeds to grow, you have to prepare the ground, to spend time breaking it up, turning it over, raking it fine. Perhaps

our job is to plough the fields of the imagination, so that the word, when it's sown, can take root. For the word of God is rather more than a black and white printed page. It's written down in the Bible, but it's as big as reality itself - and it's alive.

When the Old Testament speaks of a word, it says *dabar*. *Dabar* means both 'word' and 'deed', and these two meanings are inseparable. God doesn't just use words as tools, as we do, to give news bulletins or advertise health insurance or explain how to use computers. A word, in the heart and mind of God, is an active agent for change. God's words actually bring into being that which they express: the word of God does something. And it does it because it is informed by the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit who hovered over the waters when the world was created, and who descended upon Jesus when he became a man and lived among us. It's why people were so afraid of the prophets - they knew their words were not empty, but carried the power to actually bring about that which they foretold. As the word was spoken, so it began to happen.



When the New Testament speaks of a word, it says *logos*. The Greek word *logos* has two meanings. It means a spoken word, a message. And it means the principle of reality - that which puts meaning into the universe and into man, as philosopher Seneca had defined it. So when John sat down to write out the gospel for the Greek-speaking world, he used the word *logos* to describe both the message and the messenger. Jesus, he was saying, is the mind of God become a man - *the Word became flesh and lived among us*. The word of God has become a person, a person who changed everyone he spoke to, a person who shook the world. The Latin version of the New Testament translates *logos* as *verbum* - neatly recapturing the meaning of *dabar* - for as we all know from school, a verb is a doing word.

So perhaps our role, as we rake and till the ground of people's imaginations, is to make possible the sowing of words, words which contain within themselves the power to grow and to bear fruit. It's an art. I notice that the first person in the Bible said to be filled with the Holy Spirit was Bezalel, in Exodus 31.3. Bezalel was not a priest or a prophet or a king: he was a craftsman. God said to Moses, I have called him by name, and filled him with the Spirit, with ability and intelligence and knowledge in every kind of craft, to create the place where I will meet with my people.

So whether you till or whether you sow, whether you prepare the imagination or sow the word which disturbs, you work in company with the Holy Spirit who is active in the world, creating the place where God can meet with his people. True art leads towards God - the medium really is the message.<sup>3</sup>

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious - the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies - Philippians 4.8-9

The first step in redeeming popular culture is to craft a biblically based view of the arts – Charles Colson

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics for the KJV.

<sup>2</sup> These themes recur throughout the book of Jeremiah, but see especially chapters 2 and 7.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall McLuhan – a Christian, on whose grave are written the words 'The truth shall set you free'.