

The Quest for Truth and Freedom: Some Polanyian reflections

II. What the Church can learn from Polanyi in a 'post-truth' world

In this second part of his two-part article helping the church think about how it understands itself and the nature of its calling in a 'post-truth' world, David Atkinson relates Polanyi's insights to a number of areas of Christian discipleship and the church's witness.

As we said in the first part of this article, 'truth' is a central word in Christian discipleship. We have seen how, in Michael Polanyi's philosophy, the transcendent quality of truth emerges in the processes of discovery. He saw the crisis of the modern social and political worlds as related to loss of commitment to truth. The practice of science demonstrates the inescapably personal dimension to all knowledge. The scientist, through personal participation, and working within a tradition rooted in a framework of faith and commitment, is seeking to make contact with a reality that he or she does not yet fully apprehend. All our knowledge is corrigible, open to as yet undreamed possibilities, but we are nevertheless engaged in the quest for – and love of – truth. A commitment to transcendent values such as truth, justice, love and beauty are essential for human freedom and for the flourishing of a good and free society.

In this second part, we will seek to relate such Polanyian insights to that quest for truth and freedom which forms part of Christian discipleship. This is inevitably very brief, sketchy, partial and selective but explores nine different areas.

1. *Truth in the New Testament*

Truth is a strong theme in John's Gospel, which includes Pilates question 'What is truth?' and to which the rest of the Gospel narrative about Jesus Christ provides the answer.

Jesus Christ is described as the Word made flesh whose glory is 'full of grace and truth'. In John's Gospel Jesus says 'I AM the way, the truth and the life'. He prays to the Father that He would sanctify his disciples in the truth, for 'your word is truth.' Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as 'the Spirit of truth', who will guide the disciples 'into all truth'. Jesus links truth with freedom in: 'the truth will make you free.'¹

Truth is also a central concept for St Paul and other New Testament writers. St Paul speaks 'on behalf of the truth of God'. To suppress the truth, or not obeying the truth, is sin. Knowledge of truth is embodied in God's law. The Gospel is 'the truth of Christ', described as 'the Word of truth'. The goal is that everyone 'come to the knowledge of the truth'.²

So Christian discipleship includes 'loving in the truth'; speaking the truth in love; loving not in word or speech, but in truth and action; being armed in spiritual conflicts with 'the belt of truth'. It is about

¹ Jn.1.14,17; Jn 14.6; Jn 17.17,19; Jn 14.17; 15.26; Jn 16.13 cf. 1 Jn. 4.6; 5.6; Jn 8.32.

² 1 Cor.15.8; Rom 1.18; Rom.2.8; 2.20; 2 Cor.11.10; Gal.2.5; Eph.1.13; Col.1.5; James 1.18; 1 Tim 2.4.

obedience to the truth; walking 'the way of truth'; rejoicing in the truth, which is coupled with sincerity, and doing 'what is true'.³

The Christian Church, the community of disciples of Christ, co-workers with the truth, is described as a 'pillar and bulwark of truth'. Their worship of God is to be 'in Spirit and truth'.⁴

Truth for the Christian, then, is a 'transcendent value', rooted in the trustworthiness of God - the Word of God, the Spirit of God, the Way of God, the love of God and the worship of God.

Michael Polanyi spells out four basic assumptions for a free society. They are not far from these New Testament themes. They are

- I. a belief that there is such a thing as transcendent truth
- II. that we should seek and love the truth
- III. that truth should be known and freely served by submitting to its standards
- IV. that human judgement, although conditioned by a viewpoint, is still capable of seeking and knowing truth.⁵

In what follows we will briefly – and all too sketchily – refer back to Polanyi's insights set out earlier in his discussions of

- a 'fiduciary framework' for the way of discovery;
- the priority of the personal;
- the fact that in our quest for truth, all our knowledge is partial and open to correction
- truth as mediated through aspects of reality which point beyond themselves
- living in a many-leveled world
- human beings as capable of destructive 'moral inversion'
- a 'society of explorers' which could embody the redeeming values on which a good and free society depends.

2. Truth within a framework of faith

The transcendence of truth, the knowledge of which is gradually discovered within a framework of faith-commitment (a 'fiduciary framework'), is, we said, a foundational theme in Michael Polanyi's philosophy. Both the theologian Thomas Torrance and the missionary bishop/theologian Lesslie Newbigin – among many others – drew on this Polanyian theme.

T.F. Torrance, a Barthian theologian from Edinburgh, who developed a keen interest in the implications of modern science for theology, not only worked quite closely with Polanyi, and often quoted Polanyi in

³ 2 Jn 1; 3 Jn 1; Eph. 4.15; 1 Jn 3.18; Eph.6.14; 1 Pe.1.22; 2 Pe.2.2; cf. 2 Jn 4; 3 Jn 4; 1 Cor.13.6, 1 Cor 5.8; Jn 3.21; 1 Jn 1.6.

⁴ 3 Jn 8; 1 Tim 3;15; Jn 4. 23-4.

⁵ SFS p..71; summarized also by Joan Crewdson *Christian Doctrine in the Light of Michael Polanyi's Theory of Personal Knowledge*, Toronto Studies in Theology Vol. 66, Edwin Mellen Press, 1994 [Crewdson].

his own theological work, but also knew Polanyi well enough to be made his literary executor. Torrance accepted Polanyi's description of a 'fiduciary framework' in all knowledge. He wrote:

It was evidently not Polanyi's main intention, in reconstructing the scientific basis of man's knowledge of the universe, to make room for religious faith or knowledge of God, but he was nevertheless aware of doing just that, as a by-product of his argumentation. Not only has he helped to release Christian faith from pressure by the concept of the universe as a closed mechanistic system of cause and effect, but he has shown us that in the most rigorous scientific activity the human mind cannot operate outside a framework of beliefs which, though formally unprovable, play an essential role in guiding the thrust of inquiry into the hidden meaning of things.⁶

In *Truth to Tell*,⁷ Newbigin also affirms the importance of a 'fiduciary framework' to all knowledge by quoting Polanyi's use of Augustine's '*credo ut intelligam*' ('I believe in order to understand'), 'which Polanyi as a practicing scientist saw as a true account of the relation between faith and knowledge'.⁸

For these contemporary theologians and church leaders, the recognition that all knowledge flows from the risky commitment of the whole person in the quest for truth, within a tradition which embodies a framework of faith, believing there is a transcendent reality being made known, is an essential first step in speaking about our knowledge of God.

3. The Priority of the Personal

What does knowledge of God involve? Drawing on Polyanian themes indicates that all knowing is a skill; it is an activity of persons in community; it involves risk and commitment; it is essentially personal knowledge; it involves the self-disclosure of God; and it is the 'supreme adventure which takes us beyond everything we can know'⁹.

As we have said several times, Polanyi demonstrated that all knowledge has an irreducibly personal dimension. Faith is not just intellectual acceptance, but the risky commitment of the whole person. In Joan Crewdson's 1993 work for an Oxford BD in theology, based on Michael Polanyi, (with whom in its earliest stages she had worked) she says that her aim was 'to show that the basic unit of reality is not either matter or mind, but both-and, and that we live in an irreducibly personal universe, with personal being as its highest product.' She quoted Polanyi as viewing evolution as 'steps on the road to personhood' and personhood as the product of an environment which both challenges and rewards life's adventure' (p. 206).¹⁰

⁶ T.F.Torrance ed. *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: the relevance of Michael Polanyi's thought for Christian Faith and Life*, The Handsel Press, 1980. p. xvi

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, SPCK 1991

⁸ *Personal Knowledge* p. 266.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, SCM 1966, p. 80 – 99.

¹⁰ Joan Crewdson *Christian Doctrine in the Light of Michael Polanyi's Theory of Personal Knowledge*, Edwin Mellen Press, 1994.

According to Crewdson, Polanyi was constantly asking: 'What kind of a world can give rise to a mind capable of knowing the universe, while remaining part of it?'. She develops a personalist theology, rooted in God who is transcendent yet immanent in the world, and argues that in a similar way, 'the world transcends the persons who are part of it, and persons transcend the world by knowing it.' (217). For Crewdson, the answer to Polanyi's persistent question was that Christianity sees Jesus Christ as God's Word (*logos*), who provides the conceptual framework needed to interpret the created order, and it sees his divine Sonship as the key to the relation between God and human persons (294). In Polanyian terms, then, 'Christians find in the *Logos* of God the needed interpretative framework (rationality), that enables them to understand the nature of creation and redemption, including their own place in God's scheme of things.' (312).

This is wholly consistent with John's Gospel, in which Jesus says, 'I AM the Truth'. The basic ideal of knowledge in the New Testament is the mutual knowledge of persons, involving trust and commitment to another person.¹¹ Truth is ultimately Personal Being.

This gives a high priority to the personal in our human identities, roles and relationships. Polanyi himself illustrates this in his argument against the biochemical reductionism of writers like Francis Crick,¹² and in his elaboration of the hierarchical levels of reality as a way into the mind/body problem.¹³

As Polanyi made clear, the detached objectivist approach to science, as in such great pioneers as Francis Bacon, sadly fed the notion that we human beings are 'masters and possessors' of nature, rather than fellow subjects with all God's creatures under God's care, and with a responsibility of care for God's creation. This has contributed to an irresponsible attitude to the environment, regarded as there wholly for our benefit, instead of seeing that 'the earth is the Lord's'.¹⁴ Equally unhealthy is our current approach to economics, assuming a detached rational individual and a mechanistic approach to economic theory, instead of one rooted in transcendent values of love and justice and other human values. The personal being gets lost in the system.¹⁵

A free society working for the common good will seek not only equity amongst human beings, but the common good of all God's creatures, and will seek to understand both ecology and the financial economy within the wider framework of the transcendent values of God's creativity, human agency and interpersonal relationships.

¹¹ cf. here Lesslie Newbigin, *Christ our Eternal Contemporary*, 1968, p. 13f. cf. also: The Scottish philosopher John Macmurray argued that the starting point for philosophy should be the self as *agent*, not as detached Cartesian thinker, and gave as the primary thesis of his 1953-4 Gifford Lectures: 'All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship.' *The Self as Agent* Faber 1956 (nb. p. 15); *Persons in Relation*, Faber 1961.

¹² *Knowing and Being* chapter 14.

¹³ Michael Polanyi 'The Body/Mind Relation', a 1966 conference paper, published in *Man and the Sciences of Man*, ed. W.R.Coulson and Carl Rogers, Charles E.Merrill, 1968.

¹⁴ Ps. 24.1; cf. David Atkinson *Renewing the Face of the Earth*, Canterbury Press, 2008

¹⁵ cf. Herman Daly and John Cobb *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future* Beacon Press 1989; Jeffrey D. Sachs *The Age of Sustainable Development*, Columbia University Press 2015.

4. In the quest for truth, all our knowledge is partial

We made clear earlier that Polanyi believed that ‘there is no finished certainty to our knowledge’; the scientist knows he or she may get it wrong, which is why peer group review, correction or corroboration is so vital. Polanyi was also very clear that we commit ourselves to our theories in the belief we are getting in touch with a transcendent reality that we, as yet, by no means fully apprehend.

As St Paul memorably put it, speaking of the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus Christ in judgement and glory, ‘When the complete comes, the partial will come to an end...Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.’¹⁶ Or as John wrote, ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed....What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.’¹⁷

What this means is that though our knowledge, distorted and partial as it is, is still knowledge, it is knowledge that must remain open to correction in the light of further truth, and open to fresh revelation.

The Puritans of the seventeenth century were very clear about the strength of truth, but also clear that more is to be discovered. As evangelical Anglican theologian J.I.Packer wrote concerning the Puritan theologians

Just as God’s mind is unfathomable, so there are illimitable depths in Scripture: ‘the stores of truth laid up in it are inexhaustible.’ It is always the case that, in the famous words ascribed to John Robinson, ‘the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of his holy word.’ As interpreters, we never reach the end of God’s thoughts, and must not permit ourselves to imagine otherwise.¹⁸

Similarly, in his introduction to the Putney Debates, A S P Woodhouse commented:

Within limits the spirit of Puritanism is not only active, but experimental....The Bible embodies a revelation complete and unalterable; but there is still room for progressive comprehension, progressive interpretation; and it is here that free discussion can (as Milton maintains in the *Areopagitica*) minister to the discovery of the truth and to agreement in the truth.¹⁹

A strong statement about the objectivity of God’s truth is held together with liberty of conscience before God, our personal engagement with the truth, and the acceptance that all our knowing is limited

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 13.10, 12.

¹⁷ 1 Jn.3.2

¹⁸ J.I.Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: the Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* Crossway Books 1990, p.99.

¹⁹ Introduction by A S P Woodhouse of *Puritanism and Liberty* on the Putney Debates 1647-9, published by J M Dent 1938, p. 45.

and fallible, and not under our control. Alongside a commitment to the rational order of God's creation, and the controlling authority of God's Wisdom and Word, the Christian believer – like the scientist – is also committed to the faith that there is a transcendent truth yet to be discovered. Rational obedience to what God has revealed, and faith commitment, belong together.²⁰

5. *Mediated truth*

One of Michael Polanyi's major contributions was his elaboration of the concept of tacit knowing. His understanding of the vectorial quality of our attention *from* subsidiary *to* focal awareness, and of the stratified nature of reality into many levels, indicates that many aspects of our experience engage our attention *through* other aspects. We see the picture *through* seeing the paint.

There is, in other words, a 'sacramental' aspect to the natural world: we begin to grasp the meaning of certain things through the mediation of other things. William Temple wrote of a 'sacramental universe', a concept that brings together two of the ways in which God is thought to relate to the world: the world as an instrument of God's transcendent purpose, and the world as a symbol through which God is revealing something of God's eternal nature. As the psalmist put it 'the heavens are telling the glory of God'. One of George Herbert's poems on Prayer speaks of 'heaven in ordinary'. In another poem he writes 'Teach me, my God and King, in all things Thee to see.'

One of the ways we know something of God's presence and activity in the world is through things. A sacrament is described as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'. The one world has a dual aspect: natural and spiritual, secular and sacred, ordinary and extraordinary, natural and supernatural, transcendence and immanence together.²¹ It is by what Polanyi called 'indwelling' the outward and the visible, that we apprehend something of the inward and the spiritual.

One of the 'things' in our world through which God's Word speaks is the Bible. The mediatorial quality of the Scriptures was underlined in John's Gospel when Jesus said to the unbelieving Judeans in the temple: 'you search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify of me. Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.' (Jn. 5.39).

This has a bearing on our disagreements about biblical interpretation. The living Word of God (*logos*) is expressed through the words (*lalia*) of Scripture.²² There are some forms of Christian liberalism which overlay the *lalia* – the words – with the overriding authority of reason, because there is no belief that there the living and dynamic Logos of God is to be found through them. On the other hand, there are some forms of Christian fundamentalism which believe that the living Word (*logos*) is to be *identified with* the words of Scripture (*lalia*). This can lead straight into belief in an infallible Bible, and to a set of doctrines which are accorded higher authority than the revelation of the living Word who is mediated to us *through* the words of Scripture.

²⁰ cf. here T.F. Torrance, *Belief* p. 9.

²¹ cf. discussions in William Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, (1934) Macmillan 1964 Lecture XIX p. 473. Alister McGrath *The Open Secret*, Blackwell 2008, p. 215; John Macquarrie *A Guide to the Sacraments*, SCM 1997; Arthur Peacocke *Theology for a Scientific Age*, SCM 1990/1993, p. 341.

²² cf. here T.F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, Westminster Press 1982, Preface.

As we have said, according to Polanyi, personal knowledge emerges within a community of conviviality as a commitment of faith, based on sufficient evidence, is tested out, seeking reality to reveal itself to our explorings; it is corrigible and open to change; it is also open to being called in question, and to discovering hitherto undreamed of possibilities. This is not far from the 'critical realism' advocated by Tom Wright for reading biblical texts:

This is a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical'). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into 'reality', so that our assertions about 'reality' acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower (except for the special and highly complex case of self-knowledge).²³

I believe Polanyi would encourage us to allow the biblical words to be the medium through which the living Word of God speaks to us, and sometimes speaks freshly and with more light.

6. A world of many levels

Our reference to a 'sacramental universe' gives a theological flavour to Polanyi's description of the universe in terms of a hierarchical stratification of rising levels, each one controlling the boundaries of the one below. He argues that all meaning lies in the higher levels of reality that are not reducible to the laws that govern lower levels. So, we saw, the human being operates as a machine when regarded only in terms of its physics and chemistry. When we realize that DNA acts as a code, we recognize a higher level of ordering which is not reducible to physics and chemistry.

So Polanyi's universe consists in this hierarchy of levels, each with their own 'science' and interpretative mode. Our knowledge of the universe involves being able to strive forwards to integrate the clues on different levels into a pattern, and so try to discern their joint meaning. From a theological perspective this world is a God-given contingent order: it could have been otherwise, but it serves God's purpose by being what it is. And to give some theological meaning to the whole, as we find each level is given meaning through its connections to a higher level, we can think of the Incarnation of the Word made flesh (Jn 1.14) as, 'as it were, the intersecting vertical dimension which gives the horizontal coordinates of the universe the integrative factor providing them with consistent and ultimate meaning.'²⁴

Throughout the universe, things and people point beyond themselves towards an integrative pattern that gives them coherence and meaning. And in that search for meaning we ourselves are changed. An ultimate meaning derives from the 'ultimate mystery of being'.²⁵ This is what Polanyi means by

²³ N.T.Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, 1992 p. 35. cf. David Atkinson 'Why Do Christians Disagree', *Fulcrum website*, Dec 11, 2013.

²⁴ T.F.Torrance *Divine and Contingent Order*, Oxford 1981, p. 24

²⁵ Crewdson, p. 19.

‘transcendence’ - each level pointing beyond itself under ‘an over-arching firmament of universal ideals.’ In a very personal credo he writes:

Through indwelling I participate in comprehensive entities, from my own body and the objects I perceive, to the lives of my companions, and the theories we employ to understand inanimate matter and living beings. I partly transform myself in that which I am observing and thereby extend my range of knowing to include knowledge of all the hierarchies – from inanimate matter to the frameworks of our convivial settings and the firmament of obligations which supervene the operations of our intelligence within these frameworks.²⁶

As Drusilla Scott notes, it is when the overarching claim of one transcendent truth is denied that many different groups can all claim to have the final truth, and seek to impose it on everyone. This is what leads to what Polanyi calls ‘moral inversion’.²⁷

7. Moral inversion and redemption

If Polanyi is right that a good society, a free society, is one which is committed to the transcendent values of truth, justice, love – values which a Christian defines in terms of the character of God’s trustworthiness, God’s justice, God’s self-giving love – then a society which abandons trust in transcendent values ceases to be either good or free. When such values are defined by state authority we are in a totalitarian world. When they are identified with self-interest, we are on the high road to nihilism.

Polanyi’s insight was that ‘the objective ideal’ remains the dominant view of science, separating facts from values, and disregarding the personal component in knowledge. This leads not only to the loss of the personal by reducing living beings to mere physics and chemistry, people to cogs in machines. It also removes personal responsibility for decisions based on moral values and destroys the glue which holds communities together. The whole society becomes sick.

The loss of the personal lies behind much of the violent expression of what Polanyi called ‘moral inversion.’ When the proper human passions are directed towards the fulfillment of human values such as love and beauty, and when they are constrained within a society governed by justice and the rule of law, such passions can bring humanity enormous and abundant good. But when those proper moral passions are detached from human values and operate outside the constraints of justice and of law, they unleash destructiveness and violence.

We are not today so directly caught up into Marxist doctrine. But the process of ‘moral inversion’ is alive and well, whether that is Marxist inspired violence, or the ruthlessness of today’s so-called Islamic State.

Polanyi’s use of the term ‘moral inversion’ is of interest also in that one significant theological tradition (including Augustine and Luther) describes sin as ‘*incurvatus in se*’ – a person being ‘curved in on

²⁶ M. Polanyi ‘Transcendence and Self-Transcendence’ *Soundings* 53.1 ,Spring 1970, 88-94).

²⁷ Scott. p. 108

themselves'. The self becomes the centre, rather than the centre being 'the over-arching firmament of universal ideals', or what Christians would call transcendent values rooted in the character of God. Sin is thus not so much 'doing wrong' (though it includes that), as 'being in the wrong'. When a person's relationships with God are in the wrong, that affects all other relationships: within one-self, with others, with the environment in which we live.

Sin is not a category Polanyi says much about directly, but he does use Christian language to talk about redemption. There are many metaphors for redemption, that is for the reconciliation and healing of broken relationships, and Polanyi's work highlights that of gathering together fragments into a new unity, a new wholeness, a new society. Crewdson comments:

Polanyi reminds us that the meaning which gives coherence to a set of scattered and contradictory clues is not found within the clues themselves, but is a gift from another plane of reality – a gift of borrowed wholeness – which unites the fragments by lifting them onto a new level of being and clothing them with a new and transforming meaning.²⁸

This is not far from Christian concepts of grace. It is also close to Irenaeus' understanding of the work of Christ as 'recapitulating', that is drawing everything under a different 'head', or to use the language of the Acts of the Apostles 'another king named Jesus' (Acts 17.7). This thought is largely derived from Eph. 1. 10: '[God's] plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth' and from Col. 1.15ff.: 'all things have been created through [Christ] and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.' This is the language of redemption of all things through Christ, bringing all creation to a new coherence, a new wholeness under the lordship of God and the values of God's kingdom.

Our part in this redemptive process is to strive to exercise moral responsibility in the light of the values of God's kingdom, with the strengthening grace of God's Spirit. Polanyi almost says as much in one of the rare passages in which he speaks of Christian understanding of God, and holds our moral responsibility together with hope in God's grace:

The technique of our redemption is to lose ourselves in the performance of an obligation which we accept, in spite of its appearing on reflection impossible of achievement. We undertake the task of attaining the universal in spite of our admitted infirmity, which should render the task hopeless, because we hope to be visited by powers for which we cannot account in terms of our specific capabilities. This hope is a clue to God.²⁹

8. Truth and Freedom

Polanyi is nowhere more passionate than when he writes about liberty, by which he mostly means public liberty – the freedom of a society which is characterized by its belief in the reality of truth, justice and charity, and its dedication to the service of these realities. When these transcendent values are denied, he argued, society disintegrates and falls into servitude or totalitarianism of one sort or another,

²⁸ Crewdson p. 329

²⁹ Personal Knowledge p. 324.

in which public authorities then decide what is called 'truth' and what counts as 'justice'. He even wrote:

We may be faced with the fact that only by resuming the great tradition which embodies faith in these realities can the continuance of the human race on earth, equipped with the powers of modern science, be made both possible and desirable.³⁰

Polanyi's direction of thought (mutual participation in a community of explorers, leading to knowledge of transcendent values, commitment to which is the route to liberty) is very close to the themes of John's Gospel: 'Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."' (Jn 8. 32). Abiding in (indwelling) Christ's word, leads to the personal knowledge of him who is the Truth, and that is the route to deliverance. The background to much of John's Gospel is the narrative of the Exodus and the liberation of God's people from slavery in Egypt. In fact the primary meaning of *eluertheros* (= *make free*) is to rescue from servitude. But it is not only a freedom *from*, but primarily a freedom *for*. The Hebrew people were set free in order to serve and worship God. As the Song of Simeon poetically puts it: 'that we, being set free from the hands of our enemies, might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness all our days.' (Luke 1. 73). In the gospels and in the New Testament epistles, that political history of liberation from slavery became a theological metaphor for describing salvation - deliverance from God's wrath, from the powers of sin, of law, and of death. And this applies both to the corporate life of Christian believers ('the glorious liberty of the children of God'), and to the whole creation: 'that creation itself would be freed from its slavery to decay, to enjoy the freedom that comes when God's children are glorified.' (Rom. 8. 21).

This is the work of God's Spirit ('where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty', 2 Cor. 3.17). The life of the Christian church, although still affected by the constraints of sin, now lives under 'the perfect law of liberty' (James 1.25; 2.12), and this is precisely the freedom for love and service to God and others, and for the promotion of justice in all our human affairs (cf. James 2.1-13). It must not become an excuse for unloving licence ('As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil.' 1 Peter 2.16).

Of course there is much political debate about the meaning of public freedom, whether it is the negative freedom of the absence of coercion, or the positive freedom 'to live the kind of lives we have reason to value',³¹ including goods like social justice, welfare, or greater social solidarity. And there is philosophical debate about the extent to which our freedoms are subject to causal determinants over which we have no control. Nonetheless, the central Christian theme about freedom is that it is to do with the freedom to live in accordance with our true nature. The opposite of such freedom is not determinism, but irrationality or sin. The way to freedom is through seeking the truth. Lies, evasions and 'post-truth' are the low road to tyranny and slavery. Freedom for service walks together with truth, both in the life of the individual disciple, in the corporate life of the Christian, and in the wider society of interpersonal relationships at community and national level.

³⁰ *Logic of Liberty*, p. 58

³¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford, 1999, p. 14

9. *The Church as a 'Society of Explorers'*

Lesslie Newbigin at one point says that Polanyi's major book *Personal Knowledge* 'is a massive attempt to demonstrate that all knowledge of reality rests upon faith-commitments which cannot be demonstrated but are held by communities whose 'conviviality' is a necessary factor in the enterprise of knowing. This is as true for the scientist as for the Christian believer'.³²

Polanyi speaks about 'conviviality' in his discussion of science as an activity of persons within community, which he describes as a society of explorers. Within that society – at its best – of mutual trust and mutual accountability, scientists operate with 'universal intent', taking the risk of making their findings available for scrutiny within a community of explorers, for their correction or corroboration. They know that they might get it wrong. The scientist is committed to a reality that as yet is not fully apprehended, but as fresh truth emerges through discovery so these discoveries open up undreamed-of new possibilities of further understanding.

The transcendent values held by science and by a free society stand against the strong individualism which has no place for a society of explorers, no place for mutuality and shared enterprise for the common good. Although Polanyi supports the concept of each person pursuing their own interests, he also holds firmly to the importance of a *society* of explorers, marked by conviviality and mutual respect for transcendent values. That is his model of the good society, the free society, a fellowship rooted in transcendent values and committed to fostering the truth and respecting what is just, loving and beautiful.

All this is consistent with the New Testament models of the Christian Church. We concentrate on two models. First, the Church is a community of Christ's 'friends' (Jn 15) who are 'disciples' (= 'learners'), open to being led into all truth by the Holy Spirit. Second, the Church is 'a pillar and bulwark ('buttress') of the truth' (1 Tim 3.15), a phrase used to advise possibly Timothy himself, as he learns how to exercise leadership, but more probably all the readers more generally 'how to behave in the household of God'. The Church is here understood as a spiritual assembly of local Christian community yet part of a larger whole. The reference to 'a pillar' may recall the local Temple to Diana with its 127 marble pillars, and means 'display and hold up to public view'. A buttress gives support. William Barclay's comment on this verse gives a good summary: 'In a world which does not wish to face the truth, the Church holds it up for all to see. In a world which would often gladly eliminate unwelcome truth, the Church supports it against all who would seek to destroy it.'

A convivial community of Christian disciples, constantly learning, are thus to be engaged in displaying and defending the truth of God in a world of denial and active opposition – in a world of 'post-truth' where truth has ceased to matter. To follow Polanyi's lead, that engagement with and defence of truth would include, for the Church,

³² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of '84*, British Council of Churches 1983, p.24.

- i. a shared commitment to the truth of God, on whom we are all dependent;
- ii. a shared commitment to working within the framework of a tradition of faith, sharing the risks and excitement, and a shared participation in the processes of learning and knowing;
- iii. a recognition of the authority of a mutual commitment to God's truth, and mutual accountability to obey it, live it and do it;
- iv. a recognition that 'truth' is not mere 'factuality'; it is to do with integrity, reliability, faithfulness in discerning, interpreting and recounting reality (a parable can speak truth even though not 'factual');
- v. a recognition of the priority of the personal in our knowing, in our relating, in our deciding - in science, art, economics, politics, etc.;
- vi. a desire to come to the living Christ through the Scriptures, be open to the leading of God's Spirit into future truth and giving freedom, and to be open to fresh light being broken from God's Word and learning to live in it;
- vii. a realization of the tendency towards self-advancement, and so moral inversion, and the constant need of redeeming grace to heal and to make all things new;
- viii. holding fast to the Christological hope of all things holding together in Christ;
- ix. living out something of 'the glorious liberty of the children of God' in service and worship of God, love to our neighbours, and seeking justice in all our human affairs.

By so doing, the Church may – in the hollowness and shallowness, and ultimate destructiveness, of a post-truth culture – demonstrate itself to be a good and free society. It would do so as a society of godly explorers. It could become a model to the wider political community, a demonstration of fully personal life. It would embrace the commitment and risk of faith in shared participation in an adventure of discovery, worked out in accountable moral argument and responsibility. It would show a prior regard for the interests of others and the common good, and would actively display and defend the truth, justice, love and beauty of the living God.