

# Exploring the spirituality of Christian research

## **Introduction**

I have a profound sense that I am making this up as I go along. At best, I have peered back over 20 years of being part of the life of Church Army's Research Unit. From this I have begun to crystallize out some spiritual values that undergird having a research role within a missional community, in this case Church Army UK and Ireland.

I have tried to notice patterns, spot connections, and posit values about a spirituality of research. Even to say that is to embrace the view, that despite all the factors to the contrary, there are aspects of life that make sense. Unless we think it is possible to know things, why do research? You may be glad, or frustrated, that here I am not going to explore the rival epistemologies of modernism and post-modernism. All I am doing is telling you how I got to what became this article and what I found.

I have ruminated on some familiar passages in scripture, noticed where in my own *Lectio Divina* there are congruent thoughts, and jotted down over time a few useful aphorisms. I offer it in the spirit of 'maybe it's like this ...' or, 'my present understanding is ...'. Make of it what you will.

## **An element from Scripture**

I began a conscious preparation process back in 2010, in preparation for a meeting of what then were known as the Sheffield Centre<sup>1</sup> associates, by considering verses from Psalm 119. This psalm contains studious words like seek [2, 10], meditate [15, 78], consider [15], understand [27, 75] teach [33, 64] remember [55] learn [71,152] ponder [95] insight [99]. These are all in relation to what narrowly could be called 'the law'. More widely the psalm is about walking in God's ways [2] and all that he has disclosed about them. There are clear synonyms in Psalm 119 for the narrower sense of the word 'law': commands, decrees, ancient laws, precepts, statutes. But there are a wider set of words showing what else is being examined: promises [58], salvation [123], wonders [27], word [28].

All this could, if I had the time and skill, be connected to the Wisdom tradition, but I want to use scripture as a springboard to connect with the spiritual life, not to dive deep into biblical scholarship. On that basis, I highlight just three verses that touch on the spirituality of research.

- 1 Psalm 119:30; 'I have chosen the way of truth.' I note that it is a choice. Thus, I am fortified when I wish the evidence in research supports what I want to be true, but actually it doesn't. Here I have a choice. Research is about the search for truth, but equally it is about being truthful. The evidence must be allowed to do its work, including changing our minds. So, in my discipline of ecclesiology, when we saw churches brought to birth, and living in diverse ways which were different to inherited and honoured patterns, we needed to begin a challenge to received wisdom. Moreover, the choice is not once for all – it is an ongoing process. Perhaps we should say it becomes a habit and a lifestyle, or even a virtue. It is about being open to being changed. As we become more truthful, it may be that we can see more of the truth; truth that is far greater than our ability to fully or even adequately describe it.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sheffield Centre was the name of Church Army's Research Unit from 1997-2012.

- 2 Psalm 119:66 ‘Teach me knowledge and good judgment’. Today with the Internet and the flood of publications there is no shortage of information. It is almost customary today to bemoan the flood of information, to seek a reading of the tides of knowledge and hope to discern the streams of wisdom that flow down hidden channels beyond both. Research has an odd relationship to knowledge. We could say that the process begins with recognising that we do not know. It is also the case that often we do not even know what it is that we do not know.

Also, we don’t know when, and where, it will be found. In that sense ignorance is not merely bliss, it is essential. Research also includes being resilient in the face of dead ends. Hence the Psalm talks about seeking; it prays that God will open our eyes [18]. Equally oddly, the more we come to know, it is likely that we see more clearly how much else we still do not know. This connects to what, in the years of the Sheffield Centre [TSC], we called *Imposter Syndrome*. Others grant us a knowledgeable, or guru, status that seems ridiculous to us, knowing how little we know and for how few years we have been puzzling at some issues. Thus, we are in need of the ‘good judgement’ of which the Psalm speaks. Combining clarity about what we have discovered, and humility about the rest is helpful. I suggest it is biblical, and not very common among some researchers.

- 3 Psalm 119:125; ‘I am your servant, give me discernment that I may understand’. Isn’t it both wonderful and strange that texts we have known for years suddenly disclose a new meaning to us? What is the mysterious process by which we meet new people, dig into the experience of a practitioner and suddenly see meaning or learning in this, that we had never seen like that before. I think this is not new, and indeed I could mount a case that the earliest generation of Christian missionaries found something similar.<sup>2</sup> As ever in research we stand on the shoulders of others. Openness to evidence, openness to learn, openness to surprises is, I suggest, entirely characteristic of the Peter and Cornelius story of Acts 10. My favourite researcher’s line in the story is Peter, now in the household of Cornelius, beginning to speak. ‘I now realise ...’. This to me looks like discernment at work. Then I recall that Peter wasn’t the brightest kid in the class; moreover, he had no formal Pharisee type training. He had done nothing to merit the angelic vision in Joppa, he was slow to work out what it meant. Then suddenly, miraculously, he gets it. This looks intuitive and from above. Discernment does not come in neat packages, but we do well to pray for it.

So, a spirituality of research includes the virtues of truthfulness, humility about knowledge and dependence for discernment. We won’t do all that very well all the time. Interestingly Psalm 119 begins with ‘blessed are those who walk according to the law of the Lord [1] and it ends with I have strayed like a lost sheep – seek your servant for I have not forgotten your commands [176] The ideal runs ahead of our practice.

### ***Voices from the tradition***

St Bonaventure [1221-1274] became a Franciscan in 1243 and General of its Order in 1256. He mapped a characteristic shape to the spiritual life through his biography of Francis, establishing a pattern called purgation, illumination and union.

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<sup>2</sup> An extended set of examples from Acts 1 to Acts 12 exists in G. Lings, *Reproducing Churches* (BRF, 2017) chapter 7, The Holy Spirit and surprises in reproduction.

I suggest this has links to a research process. If there is a connection, it could be something like this. The *purgation* process begins with the digging around for data that is always time-consuming and therefore relatively long. It includes the disagreeable but necessary facing up to dead ends, that is endemic in pursuing what we do not yet understand. It involves emotional and spiritual stretching as we think, note and write, often at very the limits of what we used to know and our limited capacity to think differently, both in terms of content and direction. One could say our old understanding – and indeed the person - is being purged.

Then, at some surprising point, there arrive those far shorter periods of discovery that are elating. Some texts in Scripture *shine* with a meaning we had never seen like that before. Suddenly we *see* a connection that had not occurred to us before. We *notice* a quote by an eminent author that suggests what we are coming to think is possibly true. We *see* what someone else means. A light bulb goes on in a hitherto darkened room. This is all language of *illumination*. The mind races and the spirit soars. This second stage is far more brief, but quite different in character to the longer, darker, difficult purging.

For a few seconds, we may even have a kind of out of body experience. Something is happening beyond our ability to describe it. We are caught up in a reality – and its truth – that is deeper than the subject area of our research; it is greater than the discovery just made; it is wilder than the thoughts coursing through our heads. The experience includes gratitude to the God who reveals insights, humility that it should be us who suddenly spot it, and a sense of wonder that this is occurring at all. We have touched a truth, another part of the Truth. Perhaps these inept words reach out for the hem of the sense that we touch *union* with God himself. But such a moment is rare and fleeting. We cannot stand too much reality.

Bonaventure then counsels that we should not then systematize such a process, without the conversion experience brought by God, that by definition we cannot control. In his words:

I invite the reader to the groans of prayer, through Christ crucified, through whose blood we are cleansed from the filth of vice – so that he does not believe that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without joy, work without piety, knowledge without love, understanding without humility, endeavour without divine grace, reflection as a mirror without divinely inspired wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

I expect there are lessons to derive from many spiritual traditions about research. The Franciscan one seems to me to be apt, because its engagement with God's world means an inherent attention to what is (with a positive doctrine of creation) and its characteristic joy is a reminder that discoveries are precious things to value. At times, researchers can be made to feel that they are useless idealists, mere theorists lacking practical utility, dreamers not doers, or detached academics divorced from life. At best, we do attend to life; it is just that we are most drawn to what has not yet been noticed about it. Researchers will value having a high level of curiosity, as well as a humble ignorance.

Researchers also need patience. Because it is all around us, increases in knowledge are usually incremental. We see a bit more than we used to. It is only occasionally that what we have noticed ushers in a change of paradigm. I have come to think that in one of our disciplines, ecclesiology, we are in such a hinge time. That is both exciting, and yet difficult to be sure that the new patterns we see, and the new thoughts we have, have truly done the double listening needed and thus stayed faithful to the tradition about the content, although seeing it expressed in forms that vary from the past because of the context.

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<sup>3</sup> St. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey to God*, Prologue 4, quoted in Brother Ramon, *Franciscan Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1997) p.36.

Coming more up to date in the tradition, Bob Jackson in 2003 saw the high calling this is.

... to make discovery rather than invention normative for church research is also good theology. The business of the church researcher is not to decide *ex machina* what the Church should do. God might consider that presumptuous. Rather, it is to discern both what the Spirit is saying to the churches, and what the Spirit is doing in the churches. Because of this discovery element, there should be a prophetic dimension to church research - for a prophet is someone who first hears the word of the Lord for the Church and then relays it to the Church. Number-crunchers and story-tellers, however expert, who are unable to hear the voice of the Lord of the Church will be unable to process their information into the form that the Church requires. So church researchers need a living spirituality: to operate through prayer as well as professionalism, to enjoy serendipity as well as doggedness, to exercise prophetic gifts as well as research skills. Anyone can 'research' what is going on but not everyone can 'discover' what is going on.<sup>4</sup>

The German, Thomas A Kempis [1380 – 1471], became a monk in 1406. In his relatively quiet life he made hand-written copies of the entire Bible, four times. This may account for the wealth of biblical quotations in *The Imitation of Christ*, attributed to him. In a chapter on knowledge he too has lessons we do well to ponder.

All things were made by Him [God] and all things speak of Him and He is the light of men. Without Him no one can understand aright, no one can judge aright ... I am weary of reading and hearing other things. In thee alone is all my desire.... The more simple-minded a man is, the more he will be able to understand things dark and difficult because he will be illuminated from above.<sup>5</sup>

Dependence for illumination is clear and is rooted in both the doctrines of creation and of revelation. There is also a Franciscan touch of the curious positive relationship between apparent folly and deep wisdom. The role of the jester, the sideways insights of the parable, and even the suggestive power of images, all come to mind at this point.

Thomas continues;

The spirit which is pure, simple and steadfast does not lose itself in a multiplicity of occupations, because it does all to the glory of God and is not disturbed by self seeking.<sup>6</sup>

I imagine we can all firstly identify with the distractions that occur because 'a multiplicity of occupations'. They are present through multiple roles we may have, such as employee, parent, spouse, child, householder, church member, citizen, hobbyist. Distractions arrive unbidden through email, interruptions, meetings. They lurk in fascinating diversions from our topic, wandering thoughts and concern for what others think of our work. Thus, Thomas's word about not being self seeking is easy to note and difficult to ward off. Who we are, matters as much as what we think.

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<sup>4</sup> Bob Jackson, *Researching The Future*: Future possibilities for a research and development facility for the Church of England. (Private paper, 2003) pp. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, Ch. 3, paras. 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, Ch. 3, para. 3.

Thomas once more ...

Certainly, when the day of Judgement comes, we shall not be asked what we have read but what we have done, not how cleverly we have disputed, but how purely we have lived.<sup>7</sup>

So it turns out that virtue, is a virtue in the spirituality of research.

I see a link to a seminal passage, 1 Corinthians 13. I direct you only to its headlines. It is very clear that our knowledge is partial, and even our prophecy. We are as children looking at puzzling reflections. So we should start our truth discoveries with 'maybe ...' For researchers who begin their task, only knowing that they don't know, that approach is sense. More than that, even if our knowledge was such as to fathom all mysteries, without love we are nothing.

## **7 spaces – further connections**

The scriptorium is the obvious study, or research, place. Historically it included the transmission of knowledge. Only through laborious copying of texts could others read and learn. Also in some parts of the monastic tradition the notion of *Opus Dei* (the work of God) included three elements: prayer, study and work. The 7 spaces view of what assists enduring Christian communities, and thus a comment on what the church can be, was first written up in *Encounters On The Edge*, No. 43.<sup>8</sup> This view insists that no one place, not even chapel, does the whole work of being church; nor should any one space, and in this case the scriptorium, or study, exist by itself, or for itself.

If we put study, at least temporarily, in the centre of the 7 spaces to examine its relationships to the other 6 places, then what do the others which surround it add? Indeed, when that question has been answered, can the scriptorium be seen as really central? This hesitancy fits with Abbot Jamison's critique that since the start of the universities, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the nature of knowing has changed from transformation to information and it has been unhelpfully shorn of other balancing connections.<sup>9</sup> Below I outline aspects I see that underline how the scriptorium needs the other places.

- 1 Cell is the place of true self-disclosure before God which can lead to those brief moments of union with God; but such honesty requires the way of true humility. In such a spirit, the prolific medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas saw all his works as 'so much straw'.
- 2 In Chapel, we are part of the long and corporate tradition in which seeking God is our focus, through familiar words, not via new, more intelligent words about him, especially those discovered only recently by a select few.
- 3 In Chapter, we put ourselves under the decisions of others – both peers and superiors. In our research team with Church Army we have taken the line that knowledge is quite enough power. We do not seek political power within our mission community to turn our ideas and discoveries into policy. We only speak strategically when asked to.
- 4 Through Cloister our learning will include surprise meetings: these may be with people, events or data. Some of the most valuable learning comes via unsought serendipity. Any conference of researchers should have plenty of 'cloister time'.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, Ch. 3, para. 5

<sup>8</sup> A 2<sup>nd</sup> extended edition with some exercises to apply its insights came out in 2015. They can be ordered from Church Army's Research Unit at £4. [ask@churcharmy.org](mailto:ask@churcharmy.org)

<sup>9</sup> C. Jamison, *Finding Sanctuary* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006) p. 62.

- 5 The space called Garden reminds us that we need physical activity too. Left to itself, the brain can overcook. Life needs balance beyond the scriptorium. Yet it is also true that thinking is our work, and not to be written off by activists.
- 6 Refectory expresses that we need the society and hospitality of others and they of us. Learning about each other, and serving one another, is part of growing community. Refectory can also play a part in dissemination and output, as books were sometimes read during monastic mealtimes. Today it is more likely to be via conversation.

Living in the Scriptorium alone leads to disagreeable destinations: the ivory tower, the arrogance of the unteachable expert and the disconnected human being. The other six spaces open the doors to meeting others, meeting God, meeting further data and even meeting more of oneself.

I end with two prayers, that reflect some of the learning from others.

***A prayer for researchers***

Lord of all true wisdom,  
save us from

Reading without inspiration  
Knowledge without love  
Understanding without humility

Speculation without devotion  
Investigation without wonder  
Observation without joy

Work without piety  
Endeavour without grace  
Reflection without wisdom  
Amen

***An 'impostor syndrome' prayer:***

Dear Lord,  
we dare to believe that we exist by your design, calling and love;  
Grant us courage when we know how little we know,  
Keep us humble when others think we know,  
Teach us what we need to know  
and give us those who know and love us.  
Amen