

Death on the mountains

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore theological meaning in a particular and unexpected event in the author's life. It begins by telling the story, and then explains why all narrative is open to the possibility of theology. By means of the tropes of mountain and wilderness, it begins to expand theological horizons, albeit with a level of physical and spiritual discomfort.

Introduction: Simon's Story

I want to tell you a story, and then I want to tell you why stories are theological and what theology underpins this story. This is my story, but it's really Simon's story as you will see.

I fancied a walking holiday and I fancied going to India, so a travel company which I had used successfully before were advertising a holiday entitled *Beyond Kulu*. I had heard that the Kulu valley in northern India in the foothills of the Himalayas was very beautiful, but the clue (as often the case, and as often missed) was in the title: we would be going through but beyond Kulu into some very remote mountainous areas, in fact around the Pir Panjal region. I went with a friend; the group was quite small but friendly and interesting. On the first day of proper walking one of the group turned back. Mark had travelled with Simon and having forgotten his heart medication decided that it was too risky to continue. On Day Four, during a climb to a pass at 4700m, Simon was showing signs of

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strain – he made the ascent on a pony with the guide carrying his day pack. On the way down, we crossed a glacier and I fell on the ice quickly picking myself up. Just as I was being warned that it was even more slippery, I fell again, banging my head against a rock, sufficiently sharply that I ‘saw stars’ and may even have been knocked out momentarily. I came to, with members of the group standing over me, and blood coming from my temple. I was plastered up, realised that nothing was damaged and it was only a skin wound, but the guide offered to carry my backpack and we proceeded more slowly.

The group then split into two: a faster group ahead, and a slower group behind in which Simon and I and others were walking. Although the terrain underfoot was precarious at times, Simon was walking more and more slowly; I noticed because I was getting cold as the day was ending and light fading. The others obviously reached the camping spot, and sent back to us tea and cake very gratefully received. It was about 5.30pm and we had started the day twelve hours earlier. Simon was really struggling and the group split again, with one guide remaining with Simon and the rest going ahead more quickly with another. I turned round to see the guide desperately trying to push Simon up a very slight incline on the path.

We made it back to camp in the dark, re-joined the others and ate supper. I remember thinking that I hoped that the staff would save Simon something decent to eat as he would be very hungry. A commotion outside drew us from the mess tent: Simon was being carried into camp in a blanket by the rest of the Indian team. A little while later, the guide came to ask if any of us had any medical knowledge as Simon was in a bad way. Some had basic first aid training, but not more than that. After another short period the guide came back to the tent in a more agitated state, saying that he could find no sign of life in Simon. Fortunately, one of the group was a recently retired policeman; he and I went to Simon’s tent. It was lit with electric torches, with the Indian staff standing around

outside. Peter and I went in, and to me it was obvious at first glance that Simon was dead. Peter checked for pulse and attempted CPR, and also concluded that he had died. I said a brief prayer aloud commending Simon to God. We returned to the mess tent, all the members of the group were gathered and the news announced. Jeremy (an ex-Army officer) produced a bottle of duty free rum which he was saving, offered a good slug at the bottom of a tea mug to each person, turned to me and said: 'Now minister, give us a few words'.

We all spent rather an uneasy night, and I was grateful to be sharing a tent, which the previous day I had complained was too small. The next morning we made our usual preparations for striking camp and leaving; we had already had the discussion that we must take Simon with us, so Peter, Jeremy and some of the staff created a bier in which Simon was tightly wrapped in his sleeping bag and a tarpaulin, and mounted on the back of one of the ponies, with another pony in front. Meanwhile others of the group created a cairn and set out Buddhist prayer flags. We had a very brief ceremony attended by all the walkers and all the Indian staff in which the guide sang and recited prayers in Hindi, and I said Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer. The 'funeral procession' set out ahead down a very stony valley, and we followed some way behind.

We had three days trek to a village from which an air evacuation was possible, and this was the first point at which any communication could be made with the outside world. We had two further stops at night in which Simon's body was placed at a little distance from the camp. This cortege passed the group once at close quarters while we were having lunch. Arriving at the village of Bar-a-Bhangal, we were, unsurprisingly, treated with suspicion – the presence of a dead body most certainly rendered us and all who came in contact with it unclean for this very traditional transhumance community.

Having deflected the villagers' offer of cremation, it was decided that Simon would remain just outside the village bounds, looked after by a young member of our staff team who would continue to try to make contact with the necessary authorities, the satellite phone working only intermittently. A further three nights camping saw us arrive at the road head, met by a very solemn looking senior team from the Indian travel agency in Delhi. By then and having left Simon behind, the whole group was, for the most part, in a much better frame of mind. The evening of our arrival at the hotel, we compiled a long joint account of the events as we immediately recalled them, mindful of Peter's view that we might well face questions.

We learnt later that it took about two weeks for Simon's body to be repatriated. There had been a post-mortem in India and a further one in London. More than a year later an inquest was held in London, a number of us asked to give written statements, and one member of the group was summoned to give evidence. The coroner's narrative verdict was influenced by an expert witness, to the effect that Simon had died from cardio respiratory arrest and pulmonary oedema caused by altitude sickness. She concluded that had Simon turned back when he first felt ill, he might well have still been alive.

Dangerous Stories

All stories are open to the possibility of being theological, but they are also dangerous, especially in an academic milieu where they are likely to be distrusted. However, a theological warrant for such self-stories can be adduced from both Moltmann and Barth. In *Experiences in Theology*, Moltmann describes how he hesitated to use the pronoun 'I' in his theological writing, but came to recognise

that 'readers of a book want to know not only what the author has to say, but also how he or she arrived at it, and why they put it as they do.'¹ Barth's *Church Dogmatics* also contains a similar piece of spiritual autobiography in which he recalls the hymns of childhood.² The potential or latent quality of narrative to be theological lies in the insight that story is not just an aesthetic invention but the means by which human beings give sense and order to the world around them, and impose meaning on the remorseless flow of events in which they are swirling. So Bernard Lonergan writes:

Without stories, there is no knowledge of the world, of ourselves, of others, and of God. Our narrative consciousness is our power for comprehending ourselves in our coherence with the world and other selves; it expresses our existential reality as storytelling and storylistening animals, acting and reacting within our particular world context, overcoming the incoherence of the unexamined life.³

And Don Cupitt adds that stories become theological as they give meaning to life, at the same time as bearing an ethical imperative or reflecting a set of values.⁴ When stories begin to open up questions of identity, there is a shift of gear from the epistemic to the ontological. What had the possibility of theology now engages more fully. A children's classic like *Watership Down* examines the identity of rabbits – both individuals and groups. Stanley Hauerwas' *Community of Character* uses this example to underline the importance for all communities (and he has in mind faith communities especially) of telling and re-telling their foundation stories; the loss of such narrative carrying a particular danger. Such stories are also temporally construed, with the possibility that they allow communities and individuals not just to make sense of themselves now, but to carry into the future a meaning in which mistakes are forgiven and transformed by means of grace.⁵ One of the delights of stories lies in this play between the epistemic and the ontic.

The place of Scripture here is to provide the normative story against which all others are compared, both in the story of Jesus and in the stories which Jesus tells. At the same time, however, the theologian recognises that within this history of God's relations with humanity, there is a multiplicity of style and genre – many stories make up the one story, including insights from human and natural sciences.⁶ The little vignette recounted here also contains in micro form many of the seeds of human nature: excitement, adventure, risk, danger, hope and achievement; suffering, death, shock and bereavement. As such it is worthy of more consideration, to which I turn now.

A Theological Reading: God of the Mountain and Wilderness

A theological analysis of this death on the mountains might be developed in three ways: firstly by examining the context of mountains and countryside, particularly in relation to biblical imagery; secondly by re-visiting the experience of dying and death which this story exemplifies; lastly and more narrowly in asking about the public representative nature of priesthood in our culture and age. There is also another less dramatic story of death on the mountains to which I also wish to refer, as well as developing a sub-section of Simon's story. This reflection also adds another link in the chain of stories surrounding this event.

Seeing Simon's bier disappear slowly and silently down the valley floor, across a bed of dry rocks between the bleak mountains, this was surely the valley of the shadow of death of the Psalmist – a more glorious and magnificent passing than most of us could imagine. But there seemed little to comfort us. Indeed the pastoral imagery of Psalm 23, even allowing for its appropriation by a rural

Church of England, seemed far too gentle for this inhospitable emptiness. Yet I also think that our brief marking of Simon's death required the familiarity of those words, along with the strange sounds of Hindi and the fluttering of Buddhist prayer flags, to temper the shock and finality of death. I had had a similar experience several years before walking again in the mountains, this time in Tibet, on pilgrimage around Mount Kailas. I was asked by our young English guide to help him mourn his grandmother who had died while he was away working. Henry had set up a small shrine with prayer flags and photos on a patch of bare mountainside, and asked me to bless the shrine with the holy water we had collected from Lake Manasarovar. I explained that I could do this only in a Christian Trinitarian form, with which he was quite content. He asked me if I would like to stay and hear the readings from her funeral service; and then we sung together the words of 'Abide with me', piercing the cold Himalayan air with English rituals of death.

I found this incredibly moving, as if all the vicarious grief that had been stored up every time I sung this hymn with and for others, taking twenty years of funeral services, now poured out, for a stranger whose grave was thousands of miles away. A more scientific explanation would also insist that altitude and the deprivation of normal comforts heighten all emotional responses. Pondering later a spirituality of that trip, I reflected that it was a hard and bitter spirituality with which I was unfamiliar, in strange, physically uncomfortable surroundings. Perhaps here there was a shift not just in interpretive meanings, but I was on the edge of something more profound or ontological.

Sinai and Tabor rise in my mind as images: God's identity and the people's identity intimately connected to the God of the mountains. In Exodus, amid the thunder and lightning and the smoke, Moses establishes the people of Israel with the Ten Commandments and other instructions. They are ordered not to touch the mountain or risk death (19.12–13), and their reaction is fear (20.18–20). In

the Gospels, Jesus is transfigured on the mountain, the Old Testament prophets link past and present, his baptismal identity as beloved son is affirmed, and Peter make-believes that Moses and Elijah are to be given shelter. The initial reaction of the disciples is fear and awe, but Jesus shifts this perception in Matthew: Get up and do not be afraid (Matt.17.7), and their final position is an uncertain silence. Narrative ceases at this point.

Simon's identity (and those of his family and friends) is in some ways fixed for ever on the mountains; or perhaps it is given a frame of reference which no one had predicted. Our identity as a temporary group was utterly changed, and it is likely that no individual member will ever forget those events. The group was relatively cohesive for the period after Simon's death, cognizant perhaps of the need to hold together in unusual circumstances. For me, this article is partly an attempt to 'write out' those changes, in which a holiday became quite violently part of everyday life. Theologically, the identity of God is not altered at all, but our (or my) perceptions have moved into new territory: out of the familiar domestication of the Almighty, controlled and shaped perhaps by the gentle ministrations of mother Church, to an altogether less comfortable, less controlled awe and wonder, reminiscent of Eliot's magi ('A cold coming we had of it ...').⁷ This is not the exotic east as orientalism, but rather the cold inhumanity and ruthlessness of nature, in which our part is very small and very weak. The traditional 'fear of the Lord' may be the only way of giving some sense to this experience, but perhaps even this is a rush to explanation where being in silence is enough.

A complementary biblical theme is that of wilderness, overlapping with the mountains in terms of early Israelite history, but linked also to the later wilderness of exile. Here was separation from the familiar and the necessity for change, reflected by both psalmist and prophet: 'By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. ... How could we sing

the Lord's song in a foreign land?' (Ps. 137.1 & 4); 'Sing to the Lord a new song, his praises from the end of the earth!' (Isa. 42.10). In both wildernesses, Israel had firstly to learn and then adopt a new identity, rejecting the fleshpots of slavery, and facing the risk that such separation might build trust or undermine confidence.⁸ Walter Brueggemann's point here is that 'Wilderness and Yahweh belong together'⁹ so it would be hardly surprising for me to engage in some reflection on ultimate things. If, as Brueggemann maintains, the 'Jesus movement' was the next step on the way from exile to land, then Jesus' temptations in the wilderness are also part of this dynamic. My experience was not that of temptation, but of dislocation followed by re-assessment or re-orientation towards a larger understanding of God, and thereby of a partial transformation of my own identity as a response: a movement from the epistemic to the ontic. The wilderness reaches its most developed form in the New Testament in the crucifixion and the image of the cross, linking back to the notion of a real death. In a kenotic reading of this Himalayan story, the sense of emptiness refocused my attention from an anthropocentric universe, in which as adventure-seeking tourists we were secure in a bubble of overall control, to something more theocentric, the divine in-breaking, where a God of Sinai, Tabor and the desert called for respectful and fearful response.

Humanity's thin, tangential hold on life is obvious in these circumstances even without an actual death. If there is a third death to recount here (that of Simon and Henry's grandmother being the first two) it is my own. Disconcertingly, other members of the party made it clear that when they had heard that someone was in serious trouble they thought it was me after my head wound: 'If anyone was likely to die it was you, David' was a comment to my face. What was also disconcerting here was to be faced with concepts of purity and pollution which seemed to take us again out of the familiarity of contemporary western thinking. Intellectually, we understood exactly what the villagers felt while at the same time rejecting the practical solution of cremation. Emotionally we understood too: after all we had travelled with a body for three days and the mood lightened

considerably after we had left Simon in the village. Perhaps here there is a disjunction with New Testament ethics. We had no intention of challenging their Holiness Code, for to do so would have been disrespectful and risky – literally, and figuratively in the probable accusation of neo-colonialism.

Lastly and briefly, the call on me ‘to say a few words’ might underline a default to representational positions at times of crisis. It might also mean that it is easy to underestimate others’ understanding and appreciation of a priestly role, which they feel able to call on in quite traditional forms. Equally, it did not feel odd that we deferred to a retired policeman and an ex-Army officer to perform the more practical tasks associated with dealing with a dead body. It should not be especially surprising, therefore, if my position was called forth by someone who had also occupied a similar role. Was there tacit recognition here too not simply of alternative interpretations, but of a different quality of being: someone expected to mediate the divine?¹⁰ Although in general chat I had said to others that I was a parish priest, I had very few moments to decide whether in the circumstances to own that position for myself and offer a prayer in a tent for a man who had just died, who had not given any indication of faith; but it felt and still feels the right thing to have done. Speaking to Simon’s wife later, she thanked me for this, especially on behalf of his mother. As a cairn and prayer flags were being set up, it again seemed appropriate for me to offer a formal prayer and a prayer of consolation on behalf of the group. In response to this vicarious offering some thanked me, others said nothing. I remembered the experience of Tibet, where the veneer of professionalism was broken open in my own emotional reaction.

What am I left with after these events and this reflection upon them? Certainly, I am more hesitant about adventurous holidays, but at a little distance now, the lure of the mountains is insinuating itself

again. Without seeking the discomfort and the dislocation, I recognize that a reconceptualization of God, a new turn in spirituality, is a gift to be welcomed. I am reminded of the richness of Hebrew Bible imagery, which helps deepen and broaden understandings of God, humanity and this relationship; I am aware that this imagery does not always find equivalents in the New Testament; I am further convinced of the power of the story to give theological value, meaning and identity. The contingency of life in the neighbourhood of death renders our days very precious: an opportunity for gratitude, but also perhaps for further risk.

NOTES

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Revd Dr Tim Gibson for his insightful comments in reading this text.

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology* (ET; London: SCM, 2000), p. xix.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-77), IV.2 p. 112.

³ John Navone, *Towards a Theology of Story* (Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1977), p. 18.

⁴ Don Cupitt, *What is a Story?* (London: SCM, 1991).

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁶ David Ford's *Barth and God's Story* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1981) suggests that Barth gives so little credence to other factors as historical criticism, subject-centred anthropology and the natural sciences, and humankind is placed in such a secondary position in regard to God, that the story begins to twist under the weight it has to bear. However, Barth himself refers to "The-anthropology" as 'a "doctrine of God and man", a doctrine of the commerce and communion between God and man.' ('Evangelical Theology in the Eighteenth Century' in *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 11).

⁷ T.S. Eliot, 'Journey of the Magi (1936)' in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London, Faber and Faber: 1974), pp. 110–111.

⁸ See work by John Bowlby on attachment theory, for example in Jeremy Holmes, *John Bowlby & Attachment Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 40.

¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'The Priest I seek' in *Priestly Spirituality* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), pp. 63–76.

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Publishing Information

This article was first published in *Theology* 2015, Vol. 118(4) 270–277.

DOI: 10.1177/0040571X15577595