

# Applecourt: A theology of inflection and demolition

Peter Moreton<sup>1</sup>

One of the magical moments of my drama school training was when a much-loved and renowned drama teacher called Ben Benison gave a master class in our final year. Ben had taught us in an oblique fashion for the previous two years, setting us bizarre exercises and tasks without ever explaining their meaning. Like the wise old mentor in *The Karate Kid* who would order his protégé to catch flies with chopsticks whilst standing on one foot, Ben trusted that, fully to understand the worth of his teaching, we first had to experience the context in which it would be relevant. In one class he made us all read a line from the fire regulations over and over again as if it were a famous Shakespeare quotation. He made us do this relentlessly for three hours. One of the class had the courage to ask him what the point of the exercise was and he replied, 'If you promise me always to serve the text, then I promise you, at some point in your illustrious career, you'll be lucky enough to find out.' Fifteen years later I was faced with the task of performing Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy to an audience in St Paul's Cathedral. As I breathed in to speak I was gripped by an intense sense memory that I was back in rehearsal room three describing the location of the Barbican fountain we should gather at during an emergency. I stopped . . . inhaled in a completely different way . . . and asked the audience 'To be or not to be?' . . . I'd almost forgotten that it was a question!

Ben's repetitive class had spared me the indignity of delivering a beautiful speech exploring the value of existence as though it were just a famous piece of writing by Shakespeare.

He was a brilliant teacher.

In this particular master class he broke his silence and declared his love for theatre. For the most part he talked in technicalities about the way the fourth wall (the line between the stage and the audience) acts as a protection and allows people to maintain a suspension of disbelief. He encouraged us to spend our careers exploring the fourth wall's properties: 'It's your front line of engagement!' he said. Like Peter Brook he declared the stage to be a sacred space where you can 'create worlds from air and people from ideas'. Ben had a strong northern accent which enabled him to

## *Applecourt: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition*

speak poetry as if it were an afterthought. 'Theatre can change people' he said, 'I've seen it happen and if I ever catch any of you abusing its power I will climb over the audience, jump onto the stage and rip your throat out!' I don't think he was joking. 'Just tell the truth is all I ask' he bellowed as he shuffled out of the door.

Later I heard that Ben did in fact drag a student from the stage during a performance in front of an influential audience of agents, casting directors and producers. An important prop had broken and the student had failed to improvise, causing a delay in the show. Ben must have been in his seventies by then but he was clearly still a man of his word.

For the last three years Phil Summers and I have been exploring ways of telling gospel stories to a contemporary audience. Phil is a highly skilled and experienced storyteller and actor. We'd known each other for a while but until Phil moved to London we'd not managed to find an opportunity to work together.

We started off by booking the room above a pub in the East End of London, posting some publicity on Facebook, sending out a few emails and hoping that we could piece together some kind of audience. We chose a pub because we wanted a safe space in a relaxed social setting where we could control our environment. We also wanted to see what happens when you take the Bible out of the Church.

While we were working on the performance we decided that the stories deserved to be told in a language that, as much as possible, reawakened the original meaning of the text. We also felt that the audience deserved a chance to hear the stories as if for the first time – to rediscover the characters and events. We decided to change names and phrases to rob people of their familiarity. As we prepared to tell our story, 'Jesus' became 'The Crowd Gatherer'; 'sin' was redefined as 'the distance'; when 'sins were forgiven' we said that the 'distance was closed'; to 'repent', was to 'change your thinking'; and if you became 'filled with God's Holy Spirit' then you 'drank the Deep Wisdom of Iam'.

To make the story clearer we looked for ways to explain what we could of its context. This meant occasionally stepping outside of the story and giving the audience time to reach a collective understanding of the world we were in. We carefully scripted dramas and monologues, attempting to approach ideas from the oblique. The goal was not to have the audacity to explain, but rather to ask questions which would help an audience consider ideas and concepts that might be useful. We also wrote songs, making abstract reflections on how the stories might resonate emotionally in a modern-day context.

## Applecart: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition

Ultimately though we resolved to return to the gospel traditions and just tell the story the best we could.

*So he's no lightweight this guy, you know. He's big, like, you know. I mean people say that I'm big but this guy's real big. I guess what I'm saying is he was no lightweight. So the other guys, you know, they might assume that he's going to want a big car, you know like an MPV or a truck or something. Big guy, big car, you'd figure, but I let him look around and once he's looked at everything I wait to see which car he goes back to. I don't take nothing on spec, nothing for granted. He ain't gonna buy a car he don't want. I mean you gotta credit people with a bit of intelligence, you know a bit of smarts. And he's dirty you know, he's got life under his finger nails, I mean probably a whole new protozoa going on under there and an unbelievable smell. I mean it was overpowering . . . like he'd brought the horse into the showroom with him. So he looks like shit and he smells exactly like shit and he's built like a Hummer, the guy's a walking biohazard, but I let him look around and I wait to see where he lands you know. Not like the other guys – I don't sell him a car – I encourage him to buy one. Ten minutes later he's laid down cash and as good as driven away. Easy. You never can tell that's my point. I reckon if a five year old armless monkey came in here, long as he could talk, I'd let him look around, give him a bit of encouragement. Cos you never can tell that's my point. The smallest car in the showroom and he laid down cash. No haggling, no knock down, just cash. I keep telling the other guys the younger ones – I tell 'em don't judge a book you know cos you never can tell.<sup>2</sup>*

Three years on from that first performance, the project – now known as Applecart – is going from strength to strength. With the background help and support of people like Peter Powers and Tim Nicholls, as well as ongoing funding from the Methodist London District and Connexion, we've so far been afforded the privilege of performing to over 6,000 people. We're hoping to continue to expand our work in the near future with 'i am Mark' our most ambitious project to date in which we're hoping to tell the entire story of Mark's Gospel in over four hours of performance.

In the last three months of preparation for these performances, arguably the hardest task has been to 'unlearn' our preconceptions of this incredible piece of storytelling. It is probably impossible to separate the story that is told by Mark from the clamouring clarifications, additions and contradic-

## *Applecart: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition*

tions of the other New Testament texts. Religious teaching over thousands of years has understandably cross-referenced all biblical texts in order to mine greater depths of understanding. Our charge as storytellers, however, is to serve Mark's text alone. In Mark's mind his story did not require the additions, clarifications and clauses that later writers contributed; as far as Mark was concerned, he'd included everything in the story that we needed to hear in order to understand the nature of – as he puts it – 'the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God'. Mark didn't feel the need to describe a virgin birth, or a stable, he didn't attempt to attest a genetic lineage with King David and he didn't feel compelled to describe a physical sighting of the resurrected Jesus.

In some ways, it could be argued that to tell the story we needn't concern ourselves with what isn't there but should rather concentrate on what is. This might be true if preconceptions hadn't already pervaded our understanding of the story, but unfortunately they have, and as practitioners of the aural tradition, we know that our understanding colours our inflection and in turn determines the theology we communicate.

To try to give an example of this 'theology of inflection' we could look at the way Mark describes the Passover supper Jesus shares with his disciples in the upper room:

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God.'

Now, to a worshipping Christian this will feel achingly familiar. 'The blood of the new covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins, drink this in remembrance of me' – but there's nothing *new* about the covenant in the text, and there's nothing about forgiveness or remembrance. The 'new' covenant only is referred to in Luke's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Corinthians and only Paul's letter signifies an act of remembrance. Only Matthew's Gospel refers to the 'blood of the covenant which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins'. Mark's account seems to be the only common denominator, concise and clear: 'This is my "blood of the covenant" which is poured out for many.'

A theologian would rightly argue that all these writings contribute to a holistic understanding of the last supper, but as a storyteller serving Mark's

text, that is not our aim. We have a responsibility to Mark, and Mark alone. When we struggle with this text we have to struggle with the text that Mark left us, looking at it both in the aural tradition and in the context in which it was written. And to anyone growing up in the traditions of Judea at that time the blood of the covenant was a very specific thing.

If I were to mention ‘Chariots of Fire’ to you, I suspect most of you would assume that I was referring to a film about British Oxbridge graduates running along a beach to music by Vangelis (although I suppose there might be the occasional William Blake fan amongst you!). Very few of us would actually think I was referring to a literal chariot made of flames. The phrase ‘Chariots of Fire’ for many of our generation has become a single-entity noun – a film describing an athlete prevailing against all the odds – a cultural reference point which we could use to describe moments in our lives. If I were to compete in the parents’ race at school sports day and win, I could legitimately walk to my admiring daughter (I am of course being ironic!) and point back to the running track and say, ‘That was my Chariots of Fire, that was!’ and because she’s never seen the film she wouldn’t know what I was talking about. My wife, however, would look at me lovingly (ironic again!) understanding my cultural reference and she would nod and say, ‘Yes dear it was . . . please don’t touch me, you’re all sweaty!’

As a modern-day audience most of us are like my daughter when we approach Mark’s story. We’re oblivious to the resonance of reference. Mark’s contemporaries, however, would recognize the cultural reference – as my wife did – and understand that the ‘blood of the covenant’ was a pact with God confirming that he would smite their enemies and drive them out of the land of Canaan so long as they obeyed his commands (Ex. 24.1–8).

So, for a storyteller looking at the passage again, the choice of inflection becomes imperative. If we read the phrase with the traditional holistic understanding – including all the other interpretations that were added either elsewhere or later – then we might stress the text in the following way: ‘Then he took a *cup*, and after giving thanks he *gave* it to them, and all of them *drank* from it. He said to them, “This is my *blood* of the *covenant*, which is *poured* out for many.”’

Or we can serve Mark alone, in which case we might stress the text differently:

Then he took a *cup*, and after giving *thanks* he *gave* it to them, and **all** of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is *my* “blood of the

## *Applecart: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition*

covenant”, which is poured out for *many*. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God.’

Again, we need to acknowledge another of Mark’s cultural references. Jews of the time will, almost certainly, have been well aware of a lament in which Isaiah describes Israel as a vineyard (Isa. 5). In the same way that we immediately associate the ‘Big apple’ with New York, Mark’s audience will have recognized Mark’s reference to the fruit of the vine as a metaphor for the people of Israel.

So, if we shake ourselves loose from the influences of Matthew, Luke and Paul and take only the story Mark tells us, it could be argued that rather than a new covenant which involves Jesus offering a blood-letting sacrifice, we instead have a new ‘blood of the covenant’ – a cup of wine that is poured and shared by everyone, but that can only be drunk once God’s kingdom has recovered the people of Israel (the fruit of the vine) from the yoke of oppression.

This is just an example of the way textual analysis might lead to a shift in verbal inflection and so change the theological meaning of a story. Whichever interpretation we land on, however, we must admit to ourselves that it can never be wholly true nor truly holy. Still, if we are to communicate clearly and precisely we do have to make a choice. In the aural tradition we can’t be muddy or confused and so in the end we must choose the interpretation which we feel is most loyal to Mark. We must serve the text.

*Twenty years or more and I lost count around five or six in, you know. I mean who’s counting. A guy comes in he looks at a car – he wouldn’t look if he wasn’t interested. You’ve gotta credit people. So he looks and you tell ’em a price. And here’s the thing, the other guys they’ll change the offer, you know. He looks like he’s got a note clip, you know. He looks like he might buy a soft top and not break sweat. So they’ll up the asking price, you know fatten the commission if it comes in. But I figure if a guy’s wearing designer, then like as not he’s got less money in his bank account than the guy who shopped at Woolmart you know. Sometimes a young guy comes in, more pimples than a table tennis paddle, and you think he’s dicking around, you know. Well don’t think. That’s my point. Don’t think. Who’s to say he ain’t holding Microsoft to ransom with a new piece of software he wrote on his iphone? You never can tell. So anyway*

## Applecourt: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition

*twenty years or more and I couldn't for the life of me tell you how many cars. But five or six years in, you know, this guy walks in, this giant of hobo with dirt in his hair and he puts down cash on the smallest car in the showroom. It's this guy I was telling you about. His daughter's turned twenty one and she's beautiful and deserves the best. So he puts down cash and as I'm counting the notes I swear he's laughing and slapping me on the back and, you know, he saying, he's saying to me 'you're the only damn salesman in the whole damn state of New Jersey who'll sell me a goddamn car.' I swear on my life, the other guys took one look and called security. Fifteen years, more or less since that day, every year he's put down cash on the most expensive 4 by 4 in the showroom. Every year, part exchange on the one he bought the year before, he drives off with a new state of the art 4 by 4. He smells like shit but he's the best damn customer I ever had.<sup>3</sup>*

So if, for the sake of argument, we believe Mark is telling us a story where Jesus predicts the overthrow of an oppressive government by cross-referencing a blood-ritual with a vineyard metaphor for Israel, then how do we communicate such a subtle idea to a modern audience with variable levels of Biblical understanding? In an attempt to answer this question we must first understand not only the relationship the storyteller has with the audience, but also how it can be used to separate the audience's emotional involvement with the story from their intellectual discernment.

During the development of Applecourt we've continued to explore the nature of the fourth wall in performance (my old tutor Ben Benison would be proud of me!). In theatre, the fourth wall is something you break only occasionally and, almost always, deliberately. Often it's quite startling to an audience when a character turns out of the action and gives an aside or soliloquy. It can be unsettling or funny, but invariably there is an understanding that the character is voicing private thoughts for the benefit of the audience – thoughts that the other characters on the stage can't hear. It's usually a secret. Even more occasionally the character will continue to be unaware of the fourth wall and the actor will turn to the audience, free of his or her character, and comment on the action or the narrative. To an audience this tends to feel like an act of anarchy or at the least a serious breach of etiquette. The preservation of the fourth wall allows the audience to feel safe. They can look in at the story and, because they are distanced, they can allow themselves to feel emotionally involved with the characters. Their emotions won't affect the characters in any way. The

## *Applecourt: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition*

audience can openly laugh at a character without hurting the character's feelings, or they can cry knowing that their weeping won't seem distracting or insensitive.

For the storyteller, however, there is no such thing as a fourth wall, there is only a room in which the audience and the storyteller exist. When Mark tells us his story of good news he stands with us and tells the story. He occasionally whispers comments of clarification or tells us how a character feels, but generally he details events in a clear narrative sequence. Mark creates the world in our minds, or perhaps we reinvent his world in our imaginations.

Let's be clear that Mark's story doesn't claim to be historically accurate. Mark gives up on that conceit at the point when he becomes omnipresent as a teller. Mark moves us around his world in the same way the Ghosts of Christmas accompany Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. We stand by, listening in to Jesus quietly praying in Gethsemane and later as he stands before the high council's kangaroo court in Jerusalem before flitting to the Temple forecourt to witness Peter's horror as he realises that he has betrayed Jesus. Mark could not possibly have been in all these places, so we know he engages his imagination just as any good storyteller should. Some might claim that Mark's story was inspired by God and therefore factually correct in every way; Mark himself, however, makes no such claim, nor does he attempt to justify his all-seeing abilities. He's just a master storyteller guiding us through a tale where time is twisted, chronological journeys are dubious and endings are ambiguous enough to defy anyone wanting to box his story into any kind of finite meaning. Mark is not concerned with fact, but with truth. Mark's story is almost certainly part invention, but this enables him to use the medium of story to convey truths far deeper than historical events could reveal.

For an Applecourt performance to communicate Mark's story this poses us with a problem. We are not Mark telling the story. We are Applecourt telling the story Mark told. If we are to help a modern, western audience to engage and be analytical about our interpretative inflection, then they need to recognise our 'spin' and set it against the story. If we are to cajole an audience to see past the predilection for historical certainty or, in other words, see and think deeper into the story and discover its mystery, then we have to pull them back into their own world. We have to drag them out of the world of Mark that they are creating in their heads (under the influence of their preconceptions, however right or wrong they might be) and redirect their path. This means creating a fourth wall, not because the fourth wall distances the audience from the action (it doesn't!) but because

## *Applecourt: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition*

once the wall's there, we can smash it and force the audience to relinquish their emotional entanglement with the story.

I'd love to claim that Phil and I were the first to identify such a process, but sadly Bertolt Brecht beat us to it and named it 'alienation technique' (I'd even like to claim that I knew more about it than Phil – but sadly he was the one who wrote a thesis on it!). Alienation technique robs the audience of passive enjoyment and compels them to engage intellectually with the scene they are watching. Brecht would often have characters stop and let the audience know what was about to happen so that the narrative wouldn't surprise them into an emotional reaction.

For Applecourt, alienation technique has been one of the most important staples of our performance style. It has allowed us to play with the audience and create a world for the audience in which they can truly hear the story. In this world Phil and I can be anything or anybody. We can hate each other one minute and be drinking together the next; we can suddenly stop being ourselves altogether and play a character or sing a song; or we can carry on being ourselves but change our nature. We can trick the audience into thinking they know where they are, just so we can smash the fourth wall all over again. Each shift in the 'sphere' or 'circle of performance' allows a different relationship with the audience and gives us another chance to explain, illustrate, provoke, challenge and ultimately tell the story in a way which hopefully enables them to engage and experience, as well as analyse and process.

For example, it would be unsettling for an audience if, before Jesus' anointing at Bethany, they were suddenly subjected to a dialogue between two slaughterhouse workers listing enemies and slipping around in blood as they swear allegiance to each other. The scene may be funny but the audience will have no idea what they're watching or why. They will remove themselves from the story and ask 'What's this about? Why's that there?' If then, after the anointing, there is a strange monologue about traditional sacred blood oaths in Greek mythology, then again the audience will remove themselves from their engagement with the narrative and question their understanding of what they are watching.

But then, as soon as the words 'blood of the covenant' are mentioned, the audience will begin to feel clever. They will begin to think back and make the connections. They will recall the blood allegiances made in the slaughterhouse to vanquish enemies. They know the scene can only have been added as an illustration, that it's not part of the actual story, and they will begin to link the slaughterhouse allegiances with the Greek gods' oaths and then, hopefully, they'll begin to ask questions about Jesus'

## *Applecourt: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition*

promise in the upper room. They will begin to develop their own interpretations and their own thoughts. The true beauty of this planned alienation, though, is that they've been knocked off centre. They've let go of their preconceptions. They haven't had time to remember them. They've been too busy working out why the madmen from Applecourt are sloshing red paint all over each other or banging on about Agamemnon. Until this point in the story they've been living with that confusion, with that uncertainty, in the same way that you, the reader, have, I suspect, been puzzled by my seemingly nonsensical inserts about an American car salesman.

I suppose what we're trying to do, in a way, is to smash the fourth wall of the gospel stories themselves; destroy the suspension of disbelief that people have unwittingly built up for themselves; allow people to rummage in the bits they don't believe and see what's there; to deconstruct the story itself to the sum of its parts and pick amongst the ruins.

In all of this, though, I've discovered that my old drama coach knew exactly what he was doing. He jumped over the seats to drag his student off the stage because he knew the fourth wall only exists for the audience. It never exists for the story. The story is always true and always robust enough for us to play with. It's possible to pick it to pieces and chew on the details, safe in the knowledge that it will be just as resilient for the next generation. It will survive anything we can throw at it, just so long as we remember it's a story that needs telling and not a tome that needs quoting. We need to breathe differently when we tell it . . . breathe honestly and truthfully . . . with joy. It is good news after all!

Sometimes I hear the Bible read as though the words themselves are sacred. That's an abuse I'm not convinced the Bible can survive for much longer. I'm fearful if we rob the Bible of its story, then it will reverberate with less life than the fire regulations posted on the walls of our church halls and toilets!

*My point is, it's not about selling cars, not really, I mean that's my job, that is what I do yes, but my point is that that's not the point really. I mean the younger guys they reckon on doing well because they're young, you know, they look good, they walk the walk. But no one's going to buy the salesman. That's my point. They're going to buy a car, and they're only going to buy car if it's one they want. Twenty years and I never sold a car that someone didn't want it. And I never sold a car to someone who already liked the car they got. Sure they may not know they want the car till I point it out to them. But you gotta give them credit. If I told them they wanted a*

## *Applecart: A Theology of Inflection and Demolition*

*car and they didn't, they'd sure as hell know I was just a dirty salesman on the make. No, they know the car they need and that's the car they come looking for. They ain't looking for some fine salesman. It don't matter that I got no hair and I've filled out over the years, you know. It don't matter that I haven't bought a new suit in a decade. They ain't looking for me. They're looking for a car. So I step out the way and show them a car. So the young guys don't step out the way. That's why I sold more cars than any car salesman in the United States of America and I got a plaque on my wall to say so. Except I didn't sell no cars. Not one. I just encouraged folk to buy the one they wanted. So my point is, trust in the car, you know. If it's worth the money and they want it, with a little encouragement . . . well you never can tell that's my point.<sup>4</sup>*

### **NOTES**

- 1 Peter Moreton is an actor, musician and part of the Applecart team.
- 2 'The Car Salesman Monologues' were performed as part of the first Applecart performance (© [www.applecartlive.org](http://www.applecartlive.org)).
- 3 'The Car Salesman Monologues'.
- 4 'The Car Salesman Monologues'.