

Campus Christian Fellowship Lunch: Chung Chi College : Th. 2 march 1989

A VOICE IN THE AIR

Reflections on a Radio Ministry

I believe I made my first appearance on a theatre stage at the age of a few months or less: my proud mother and father were both members of an amateur musical and dramatic society at the time, and (according to family lore) they brought me along with them one night, for show no doubt. My first solo radio experience came a bit later: here in Hong Kong, actually, when I stood in a couple of times for a colleague who was sick, and read his scripts for him. That was in 1960, in a small studio in the old waterfront Mercury house headquarters of what was then Radio Hong Kong. Before that, I'd written a few simple scripts of gospel dramatisation, a couple of which had been done on the air. But I seem to remember I always had an interest in radio broadcasting, though it was only later, in the mid 1960s, that I got any actual training. That, such as it was, was mostly on courses at the BBC in London, an experience for which I've always been grateful. I remember having to provide in advance two sample programmes: one was to be a 15-minute devotional type of presentation --- and I spent days and days beforehand sweating over getting something down on paper. When I got to the course, my poor little 15-minute sample was the one they selected to criticise, tear apart and produce as a course production-exercise. The irony of that is that, since returning to Hong Kong in 1967, I've been writing, voicing and producing myself in a thing on Radio Television Hong Kong that's now called "Morning Prayers", precisely a devotional-style programme that's, well not quite 15 but 12+half minutes long, but it's every week and often twice a week. By now I reckon I've done something like 1800 of these programmes; though (to let you in on a little secret), my stack of scripts isn't quite so big, about 1250, for a number of them have been aired more than once, with minor changes. That programme is my main personal contribution to religious broadcasting in Hong

Kong; though you might also recognise my voice from Sunday nights together with the Rev. Tom Lung in a programme of religious news and current affairs,....and from occasional other programmes too. I should say that I do all this under the aegis of an ecumenical committee which is responsible for English-language religious broadcasting [there's a parallel Chinese committee besides] This committee has officially-appointed members from the Anglican and from the Roman Catholic Churches, and other members representing the other main English-speaking church congregations in Hong Kong. We have close and cordial contacts with RTHK, and liaise with the 2 TV stations now also in producing a locally-sourced church service on TV each Christmas and Easter.

As you're all aware, what I do on the airwaves is a part-time thing in addition to being warden of an undergraduate hostel here on the campus; but it has this great attraction, that it's such a completely different kind of work and outreach, a complete change from what provides my literal daily bread. It's a more directly spiritual and religious contact and ministry --- even though, in the nature of broadcasting, you don't actually feel and hear and see peoples' reactions like you do in the more 'traditional' fields of ministry. But that's something you learn to live with and make allowance for.

Radio is my own choice of medium. OK, so it's not as 'important' or prestigious or influential or glamorous or expensive and time-consuming as TV is ---- at least, so says the popular wisdom. My experience with television is mainly behind the scenes or off-camera, and I personally prefer that side of things. I don't pretend to be any great threat to Jim & Tammy Baker, to Jimmy Swaggart or any of the other stars of Televangelism (horrible word!). Obviously TV reaches huge numbers of people, and for the same reason obviously the Christian churches and individual christians want to make use of it, somehow, to spread the word of God, to make Jesus known, to draw people to God's love and salvation that we would want others to share with us in joy. Religion on TV is

very difficult, and even more difficult (I think) to evaluate. For one thing, it's such an expensive and glamour-laden medium that, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, the medium does too easily come to be the message.

In public perception, radio is very much the underdog, I think, compared with Television: ask anybody. I don't know whether it's cause or effect, but in fact the advent of TV almost everywhere has greatly affected radio in both its content and in its audiences and their expectations. It's a great pity, and to my mind a great squandering of a marvellous invention, that so much radio broadcasting now consists of what's been called "aural wallpaper", largely controlled by advertising agencies and/or governments, and used as a vehicle for advertising all sorts of goods, services and what have you. But as people tire of television, radio does get a new lease of life ; and talk-back radio is one good result, even if it may not always be well done. It's something that radio CAN do which TV really can't. Now, VCRs have already begun to change television habits; and you're going to see more changes when CableTelevision comes in. A bit like what the invention of the audio cassette and the Walkman did to radio. You can carry around your own choice of music all the time. Yet radio survives.

Another image coined by Marshall McLuhan may help understand why. He spoke of media being "hot" or "cold" media, 'hot' being those that involve the people who're being addressed. Radio does involve you, in a way that television does not: radio's immediate, it's now, it's sound and sound only. And that's its peculiarity and its strength --- coming to us only through the human sense of hearing. Remember the famous incident of Orson Welles' broadcast 50 years ago of "The War of the Worlds" ? No one, as far as I know, has ever taken a TV show to be "real" in the same way people took that broadcast. It's maybe one of the things about ourselves that we forget a lot these days, with all our modern inventions of film, video, computers, lasers and other ways of preserving things: hearing is a very intimate and evocative faculty, quite different from sight. Of

the two, maybe it's much more formative/informative than we usually think. An actual true story to illustrate: a Dutch Jesuit friend of mine did his basic radio and television training in London, and he tells of a session with a group of school-kids whom he was quizzing about their viewing and listening habits. One boy said he much preferred the radio; my friend asked him why; and he said, "it's because the pictures are better on radio". Yes; you do your own visualising... It certainly is a curious thing about us, that sight is the only one of our five (or six) senses that we can actually "turn off", by shutting our eyes. You can't do that with your ears. So I like to think that the good Lord made us more receptive to radio than to TV; that radio's a more human kind of contact, a more effective communication at a deeper personal level. Well, that at least is a good rationalisation of why personally I'm more into radio as a ministry rather than the much more wide-reaching television.

Radio is, indeed, "broad - cast" too. But here, as elsewhere, the descriptive word can also obscure things. Talking on radio is not simply a matter of putting a microphone in front of yourself or of someone else who's speaking. There may well be thousands or millions of listeners, but they're not just a "mass"; most people everywhere, and especially since the transistor came on the scene, listen to the radio alone, either literally 'on their own', or even in a group hearing the same broadcast, each hearing 'privately' so-to-speak. So in radio training, one of the first things you learn about giving a talk on the radio is that you'll be talking (or should be) as if to an audience of 1. You don't 'talk-at' a person, or lecture them, in normal conversation. Your language is different from what you'd write ----- and this is one of the things about literacy, that with its emphasis on the written and read word we become less conscious of the use and power of the spoken word. That's why writing a radio script is something one has to learn. Normally when you're talking to someone you have their immediate reactions: you can see their faces, their body-language and you instinctive adjust to them. Even addressing a large gathering, giving a

speech (or a sermon), there is an eye-contact and a presence that, in its turn, is affecting you. On the radio of course you can't see your audience, and they can't see you either --- which is not only a great advantage for perhaps the more shy or the less photogenic, but has an important function in the way voice and sound actually work. But it also makes talking to an inanimate microphone a kind of skill to be learned. Have you ever heard, or heard of, the now famous Alistair Cooke who for just over 40 years has been doing a weekly 15-minute piece on BBC radio called "Letter from America" ? Well, he says a question he's constantly asked by people is: does he write it all out or just speak from notes --- because he always sounds so natural, relaxed and even a bit wandering or hesitant at times. The answer is yes, he writes every word of it. I think you can hear that on the air: certainly you can usually hear when someone is not talking from a script, or is reading one that's not their own, or that's really something to be read rather than listened to.

There is, in other words, quite an important difference between the spoken word and the written word. And it has a great relevance to the way we read and understand the Bible, I believe. The point has been coming home more clearly to me since I began to do, on the radio, a series of programmes presenting the complete texts of a few of the New Testament letters. As letters, they were mostly written to be read out loud and listened to; indeed, literally 'hearing the word of God' rather than reading it was, until the age of printing and literacy, the way most people met the scriptures. I don't want to get too philosophical, or even theological, about this; but in reflecting on my own involvement in radio as a ministry, it's my fascination with the idea of sound and voice and the spoken word that I'd like specially to share with you. For I think we greatly underestimate these days not just radio but voice and sound too. Let me give a couple of instances: I can remember more than one occasion when people have been surprised to be told that something I'd said on the air which caught their attention was in fact something they themselves had already read and

not paid too much attention to; like, what I thought was a particularly attractive message on a Christmas card once. Then there's the phenomenon of a turn of phrase, the way something is said, which will set off in your mind a whole train of memories, like verses of poetry, things you thought you'd forgotten.

Audio cassettes, of the spoken word especially, share this powerfulness. The idea of the word being mightier than the sword is maybe familiar enough, and we've been given perhaps a chilly reminder of that in the current affair of Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" and the Muslim reaction to it. But there's another instructive side to that affair too: the power of the spoken word was very much what brought the Ayatollah Khomeini to political power in Iran; for, during the years of his exile in France while the Shah was in power, he (or his entourage) 'discovered' the newly invented cassette recorder: it was the wide diffusion on cassettes, of the Ayatollah's sermons and speeches that fuelled the Iranian revolution and made him the hero and figurehead that could take over. What am I offered for cassettes of my programmes ?

Radio (or audio cassettes) is only sound; you hear it, even if you're maybe not really listening to it; but you're not distracted by vision. We keep on being told these days how important "visuals" are; we have to have pictures, moving or not, to catch peoples' attention, to keep students interested, and so on. A picture, we're told by ancient wisdom, is worth a thousand words: but I'd suggest that goes for the written rather than the spoken word. I know studies have shown how much more retentive people are of things they've both heard AND seen; and I don't deny the power of the visual and its impact. But ask yourself: what difference does it make what a radio actor, or a radio newsreader (for instance) looks like ? Or try this: if you know my voice from the radio but haven't seen or met me until this afternoon, what are you thinking now ? I'd really be surprised if the "video" so-to-speak hasn't been

somehow distracting you a bit from the "audio"; there's something different about how you listen, the "picture" maybe isn't so interesting as the one you made for yourself when you only had the radio.

I'm suggesting that our modern civilisation has somehow lost something in forgetting how to use its ears, in the kind of way our ancestors HAD to use their ears before pen and ink, books and print and video screens came along. We're too impatient now to listen to a storyteller: we demand quarter-hour packages of screen "action" instead. I say this not out of simple nostalgia but to emphasise the change that in many ways has taken place just within our own lifetimes. And it's a change that has a lot to do with moving away from an aural and an oral culture into one which is, in the popular phrase, more "cool": McLuhan I think would call it "cold": non-involving, impersonal, detached. But I fear I'm treading maybe unorthodoxly in the field of the social scientists. My interest in this is how it concerns Christian faith and life and practice; what it means for the Word of God, in the various meanings of that expression, not least as the written and narrated story of God and humankind. Radio and audio remain, of their nature, firmly in the realm of oral and aural tradition; something worth thinking about, and how best make use of them in our more video world. I do regret nevertheless, the passing of the little old gentleman I used to see every week when I went to the radio station to do my programme 'live': he was in an adjacent small glass-walled studio, by himself, on the air, his script clutched firmly in one hand, the other gesticulating wildly, and his whole face and body making it quite plain he was completely engrossed intelling a story.

When I began to think about what I was going to say to you today I jotted down some random references I thought might be relevant or useful in reflecting on radio and voice and ministry. The scriptural ones turn out to be particularly interesting in the light of some of the comments I've made; they

show up how oral and aural the Bible actually is, starting from the very basic concept of "the Word". As you know, that's a whole biblical theology on its own. Trying to think of the bible more in terms of "listening", "hearing", "voice", "sound", and recalling the non-literate nature of the societies among whom and for whom the books of the bible were written, begins to offer fresh perspectives on many things, including the differences between reading the bible and hearing it spoken. Without further comment, then, here are a few of the references I noted: in the gospel parables, Jesus as THE story-TELLer, and the refrain "he who has ears to hear..."; in the Old Testament, the presence of the Lord in the "still small voice" Elijah heard at the mouth of his mountain cave ("a light murmuring sound", another translation has it); John the Baptist as the "voice of one crying in the wilderness"; the repeated occasions when the gospels record "a voice from heaven saying (about Jesus): this is my Son, the Beloved, listen to Him"; Jesus' words, "blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and keep it"; from the Pss: "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts"; the Lord's words that Isaiah heard: "who will speak for us ?". Finally, two non-biblical quotes: James Joyce's comment about the meaning of his "Ulysses": it's the sound, not the sense, that matters. And the Christmas carol: "Do you hear what I hear ?"

Well, what DO you hear ? I come finally to what might be thought of as the Hong Kong question: what's the value, result, effect, worth of my radio broadcasting ? I have to say, I just don't know. But an opinion poll or a bit of audience research wouldn't tell you, either. What I do know is that people (some people, anyway) do listen; that, sometimes, individuals are kind enough to say they've been helped or inspired or whatever by something I've said or produced on the air; that others who could have done so have not exercised that great freedom radio gives, of simply turning off. What I try to do is to talk with a person over the air, and according to the nature of the programme, give some information or inspiration, encourage reflection or sharing a prayerful

spirit: I try to do this in a way that's reasonably entertaining, and with a lightness of touch and of heart that will let a listener know it's a friend in God who's talking with them. I hope, somehow, that my small voice or talent (itself God's gift) may be a channel that God can use to touch peoples' hearts: but only He knows the answer to that. YOU tell ME if any of this makes sense, is actually happening when you turn on your radio and hear my voice out of the air