

Paula Gooder – Readers on Writers 3 – Hilary Elder

The first thing I need to say is I'm gutted I couldn't come to the Reader Licensing this year – I could have met her!!!

As you can see, she is extremely well-connected! (slide 1)

And even those of us who did not see Paula in St Nicholas' Cathedral, or study *Heaven* with the Readers study group, will probably have seen her before. This photo was used all over the media in the week the General Synod voted against the admission of women to the Episcopate in the Church of England.

I first came across her when I subscribed to the *Church Times* and her book *Ordinary God* was the free book you got at that time.

This picture gives us lots of clues about Paula Gooder. It shows where she stands on the full participation of women in ministry! It shows her as a committed and engaged member of the General Synod. And I think if I had to characterise her work – from what I've been able to dip into in the last few weeks – the first words that come to mind are:

Practical theologian.

Paula's publications are mostly collaborations.

They are often study courses for groups and individuals, Lent courses, an Advent course, an Easter season course, a study course on Women and Men in Scripture and the Church – which is specifically designed to take contemporary Christians in small-group study courses through an argument that the full priestly and episcopal participation of women in the church is biblically supported.

And, of course, a co-authored guide, *Reader Ministry Explored*, which is designed to help someone considering Reader Ministry to think through what this calling might mean for them.

Paula Gooder is in the thick of things.

The core of her work is as a biblical scholar, with research areas of Paul (especially 2 Corinthians), New Testament Interpretation, and the development of ministry in the New Testament period.

But she uses that core as a springboard to contribute practically to today's church:

She educates, visiting lecturer at several universities and colleges, and has been involved in ministerial training for some years.

She advocates, giving talks, being Theologian in Residence for the Bible Society,

She votes – in General Synod!

Some characteristic features of her writing.

First, her exegetical method.

(slide 4)

In practice, this means she brings to bear her own scholarship, linguistic and historical, though she often sits fairly light to this in the books – sometimes I feel I'm expected to take it on trust a bit more than I'd like.

This says nothing, however, about how she picks her topics, and I think this is telling.

Her motivation tends to be contemporary and engaged. *Women and Men* clearly comes from the sense of a need, here and now, to encourage people to think positively about women bishops. We're back once more to the practical theologian.

She is often motivated by a personal need or desire – *This Risen Existence*, for example, came from the sense of a lack of personal devotional materials to use in the Easter Season. She writes:

“This book is in some ways self-indulgent. Easter is one of my favourite times of the year and resurrection one of the pillars of my faith. Yet many years I find myself disappointed. We work our way through Lent, reflecting deeply on issues of life and faith and, at last, arrive at Easter Day, when so often we stop our study and carry on as before... I have for many years longed for a book that would take me on a journey through Easter to Ascension Day and Pentecost, which would allow me to think more deeply and seriously about what the resurrection means to me and the way in which I live my life.’

(*This Risen Existence* ix)

This shows another feature of Gooder's work: it's accessible and related to ordinary daily life. Gooder has a passion for communicating, and her books are in general meant to be understandable by ordinary Christians. This is one of the things that make them so useful!

Books like *This Risen Existence* and *Ordinary God* take the form of reflections on a series of Bible passages chosen to consider the theme in question. Individually these are often very satisfying (and can be rather useful in sermons), but this format, when read as a book rather than used as daily devotions, gives an incomplete picture, so that you don't always get an in-the-round exposition of her theology.

However, I am going to spend a few minutes trying to outline one aspect of Gooder's theology that I find especially interesting, and that is especially appropriate at this time of year – resurrection.

Those of you who have studied *Heaven* will probably find quite a lot of resonance in what I say about *Resurrection* – it's linked.

She begins with a very traditional analogy – spring flowers, but uses this to point out a crucial difference between simply being raised to life qua Lazarus, and Jesus' resurrection:

'their new life is cyclical, interwoven with death, whereas Jesus' is not. Jesus rose to new life and will never die again.'

(Resurrection and the End Times).

Not all Jews believed in afterlife, but those who did believed it was:

- Bodily
- In the future when God intervenes (with Messiah?)
- To bring in a happy time – the end times.

The end times and now – time isn't a continuum for God – it's a bit sci-fi. It's as if a bit of the end-times has been moved to two thousand years ago. It's a displaced piece of time.

It enables us to see glimpses of what the new world order will be like.

Hence belief in resurrection is also belief in the possibility of a better way of living. It's an 'act of rebellion against the evil, corruption and oppression that can so easily swamp us.'

So it should transform not only how we view the world but how we live in it. We should become people of that new life – of course in practice this happens in fits and starts because we're in the old time mostly.

Resurrection and us:

Participation in Christ as an idea requires us to think corporately, rather than individualistically - think of ourselves as interconnected. This means that a small number of people can have a huge effect on the fate of a whole nation – and there is truth in this that we're not always aware enough.

Humanity is infected with Adam's identity of disobedience and imperfect relationships. In baptism you die to that identity and are reborn with an identity infected with Christ – possibilities marked by love, lack of concern about status, putting others before ourselves, being hopeful, not despairing etc.

This happens in glimmers! But we can see it works, group culture is important in our individualistic world – we've all been to meetings where the behaviour of a few has stopped anything positive from happening, and we all know of committed and determined groups of people who've changed things for the better.

Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost:

It's death, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost that make a whole picture:

- Resurrection offers transformation in Christ
- Ascension gives us the motivation to act
- Pentecost the possibility to act.

If Jesus hadn't ascended we'd have left it all to him, he wouldn't need us to be his agents.

If no Pentecost no Holy Spirit so we wouldn't have had power to act.

Living the Resurrection:

This is not about being cheery ALL the time – how annoying would that be? It's not saccharine, it doesn't ignore suffering.

It means 'we enter the hard times with our feet firmly planted on the rock, our souls anchored in the hope that Christ brings... It does not lessen the pain but it can help us to trudge on. It is a truth that sometimes we may cling to with the very tips of our fingers, and in really bad times that we lose touch of altogether, but it remains there waiting for us, when we are able to embrace it once more.'

I find this very exciting. For a long time I've been thinking about the Easter Season and what's special about it, what's special about the time when we remember Jesus risen but not ascended. This is because I believe my own pet poet/theologian has a theology of this – for reasons I won't go into now – and I've been trying to work out what it is. I suspect it may be rather similar to Gooder's and I intend to write to her about it – for now, I'm just happy I've got a mention in for Aemilia Lanyer tonight, because one day I'd love to speak to you properly about her.

And finally – I've really enjoyed getting to know Paula Gooder a bit better. I find it hard to assess her theology because she speaks so closely from my natural point of view that I can't tell if it's brilliant and revolutionary or I'm just hearing what I want to hear. A bit like Mark's Gospel in its original ending, her books often beg the question, 'what next?' It's up to the reader what we do with the insights and questions that Gooder gives us, and it's in practical outworking that these books will have their true value.

And really finally – Here is someone who is a scholar, committed to deepening her learning about the Bible, and a communicator of the Bible, transmitting what she has learned with passion and skill. Someone who is rooted in the Anglican Church but who is willing to critique it. Someone who draws deeply upon her own experience of ordinary daily life when thinking about the Bible and her faith.

It seems to me that one of the things Paula Gooder is is an example of a Reader par excellence.