

## **Sunday 12 February 2006: The Third Sunday before Lent**

### **What is 'Good Religion'**

**1 Corinthians 9.24-27; Mark 1.40-45**

#### **What is good religion?**

What is good religion, and how do we discriminate between good religion and bad? This is one of the most insistent and important sets of questions facing people of faith today. When I say, as I do at the beginning of every sermon, "May I speak in the name of God", it is because this is both what I pray and that I am impelled to do. In this case what is spoken in the name of God is the problem and the sermon is an inadequate attempt to address it. I am not offering the last word on the subject. In God's name, and in the formal discipline of preaching, I am trying to open up an urgent conversation.

#### **The Background**

Throughout the Twentieth Century, but particularly since the second World War, in Britain and Western Europe there was a rapid process of secularisation. Christianity lost numbers and social and political significance. The prevailing assumption in society was that since the scientific Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religion was in terminal decline and in the end all sensible people will grow out of it.

What became clear towards the end of the twentieth century is that religion is a persistent phenomenon and will not go away. To be human is to be religious. In response to our 'brief moment in the sun' we wonder at the beauty of creation, and in all the chaos and chance of our lives at the enduring power of love. We long for relationship with God.

So, Western secularisation did not kill religion, but as Christianity lost its hold over the majority of the population new religious movements multiplied, lots of them absurd and irrational. As G K Chesterton said at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, 'When people stop believing in God it's not that they will believe in nothing but that they will believe in anything'. It's not difficult to see why Richard Dawkins's thinks religion is like a virus that endangers humanity.

Another reason why there is a growing interest in religion in the West is that one of the impacts of globalization is that we have become immediate neighbours to a world of faiths. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our great cities which have become so cosmopolitan that in our localities we meet the full variety of the world. London is amazing in this respect, 'a world in a city'. Over 300 languages are spoken in our city and all the world's religions are present.

Because of the process of secularization, increased emphasis on the freedom of the individual and the rapid rise in the late twentieth century of religious pluralism, we have lost interest in the critical question of what makes for good or bad religion. It is therefore not surprising that we are simply terrified by the current upsurge of religious movements and don't know how to respond to them.

We might also be feeling that our own Christian belief are under threat because in a pluralistic world of religious faiths no one religion can claim exclusive and complete Truth. As Arundhati Roy wrote in her novel The God of Small Things, it is no longer possible for us to tell one story: this is the age of many stories.

What gives me hope is that people who are secure in their own faith and who engage in careful religious dialogue often discover a great deal about our own religious faith as well as the other's. A great deal is held in common and there are some interesting and often creative differences, which is what you would expect given the great variety of humanity under one God.

Nevertheless, given the history and the difficulty we have of discerning good from bad in matters of religion what can we say as Christians about what makes for good religion?

Here is a start.

### **By their fruits you will know them**

Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them" and St Paul took the standard lists of virtues in his day and identified them as the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Gal 5.22). So one test of religion is whether it fosters what are universally perceived to be virtues. Does the practice of religion make us better people?

Every religion carries an account of what it is to be human and that which we share with others is universal wisdom. Christianity says is that we are made in the image of God, are creative, intelligent and have considerable degree of free choice. That's not exactly unique but the recognition of Christ as the human face of God does show a distinctive pattern of service and sacrificial loving that we would say is at the heart of what it is to be fully human. The critical question is whether this makes us bigger people with larger hearts and minds, whether Christianity makes us more alive or less? Irenaeus, the second century bishop of Lyons said that the glory of God is a person fully alive. That's a pretty good test of religion, and for Christians the deep answer is in our experience of sharing in Christ's resurrection from the dead.

In describing the *disciple* of Christ as like an athlete in training, St Paul is also saying that we need to be *disciplined* in our religious practice. This isn't just about how we feel at the moment but about what we set our hopes on, what we strive for in our lives, and the habits we need to maintain. In a way this tests our commitment and determination, whether religion is sufficiently worth it as to make a long term commitment. That too might be a test of fruitfulness.

### **The lame leap...**

Today's readings suggest another set of criteria. The Gospel story of the healing of a leper is one of a number of stories told about Jesus to show he fulfils 'the Isaiah agenda': "the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them".

Good religion heals, makes whole that which is broken, repairs the damage we do to ourselves and our world. That Jesus does this is how he is revealed as the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

Religious people are always open to the charge of hypocrisy, none more so than preachers who fail to practice what they preach. It is potentially the hell the preacher's existence – and more people preach than stand in pulpits - but it's only a problem if what we believe is in our own moral and spiritual perfection or superiority. What Jesus proclaimed is repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*. Our healing begins when we stop believing we can get it all sorted by ourselves and turn to God. I love the original New English Bible's translation of the first of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5: "Blessed are those who know their need of God" (Mt. 5.3) Such a person is open to God and that's where healing begins.

### **Keep it 'real'**

One of the things I most admire from the recent history of St Martin's is the number of older members of the congregation who came here searching for something and stayed, "because it seemed so 'real'". It's difficult to make this an adequate test of religion but there is a sense in which 'we know it when we meet it'.

To say God is real and that in Jesus we see God fully is not the same as to say and we have no more to learn about God. The language of the Trinity suggests God is complex, like a person only infinitely more so, multi-faceted and ultimately beyond our understanding. The Scriptures say that the Holy Spirit will lead us into truth and that is the journey Christians seek to make by following in the way of Jesus Christ.

If something is 'real' it does not need to be defensive and can be open to dialogue that might change us. Increasingly I see this as a touchstone for the Church. Are we open to the stranger in the way that Jesus suggested the kingdom of God is to be found in the marginal and disregarded?

Jim Wallis, who is coming to meet with those who would like to stay after this service, says that there are two powerful forces in the world today: the hunger for spirituality and the passion for social change." This is what 'real' religion does in a way like nothing else on earth.

The trouble is, the prophet Chesterton again, "It's not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried."

### **Conclusion**

Fruitfulness, healing and reality, they're my top three tests of good religion. They aren't the only criteria, and they won't be sufficient, but they do help in the struggle to discern good religion from bad.

Perhaps the most greatest problem for Christians is that a large number of people in our society have lost what the Bishop of London calls our 'Christian grammar' and the

greatest challenge comes from the Muslim who said, “How can you say you respect our faith when you have so little respect for your own”.

We are here because we do respect Christianity and can be sufficiently confident in Christ to be an open church which at least says we want to try to welcome the stranger. It is an important gift, not just for ourselves but for the sake of the world.