

Sermon: The Church of England 22nd October 2006

If you ask a Christian what the Christian faith is, you might get a whole range of answers. Some will say that it's a set of principles to live by. A moral code taught by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. The Bible and Bible reading will get a mention. When it comes to talking about prayer and Sacraments, most Christians back off and become a bit vague. Well, English people are traditionally diffident and probably would rather leave religion to the Padre. Ask your man in the pew – can we say *man in the pew these days* or does it have to be *guy in the pew?* – and he'll sum up what he understands of the faith in the little motto *Do as you would be done by*.

But I want to start somewhere else with this question about Christianity. We don't actually learn it as a set of principles – nothing so abstract and formal as that. We first become acquainted with the Christian faith by coming into contact with *things* – with visible, tangible particulars. Later on we might generalise. But that's not how we begin. So I want to talk a bit about that particular set of particulars called the Church of England.

When you think about the Church of England, you probably see a mental picture of a church – almost certainly Gothic with the pointed arch. This picture is surrounded in the imagination by sounds: church bells; the organ. But not just any old sound of the organ. It will be a hymn. And if a hymn, then a particular hymn. *O God Our Help in Ages Past, Now Thank We All Our God*. Or it might be *The Day Thou Gavest Lord Is Ended*. And if it is that, straightaway in your mind's eye, in your mind's ear, you're in Evensong.

The end of Evensong and the scent of the just-extinguished candles. Perhaps a voluminous, clattering town church and the lighting not as good as it might be. Or the village church and the last of the sun streaming through the west window as you're singing *The sun that bids us rest is waking our brethren neath the western sky*.

So you see when you think of the Christian faith, you enter a world, an intensely atmospheric world of sounds, sights and scents. Now a Puritan or, worse still, an intellectual, would tell you to discount these tangible things and concentrate on the principles behind them. The Puritan intellectual would call these familiar things *externals* and be already disapproving of them. Wrong from the start. And why is he wrong? Because since the Creation and the Incarnation we are embodied. We are bodies, parts and passions and so our response to God is physical and sensual: we are not disembodied mind.

The profound particular embodiments of the Church of England are *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer*. For four hundred years that Bible and that Prayer Book formed the substance of the Church of England. There were of course religious differences. There were High Churchmen and Low Churchmen, Evangelicals and what came to be known as Broad Church. But they all used those same books. Think of it: the High Churchman John Keble and the Evangelical preacher John Wesley both said the same canticles: *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace*.

And when they read, year in and year out – century in and century out – the great seasonal lessons, they read the same words. Christmas shone brilliantly in the dark time of the year as we said: *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields*. And in the daffodil English springtime those terrible words: *And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots*.

By time and use, those words entered into our very flesh and blood. Trying to change them was as impossible as changing the winter darkness or the spring daffodils. What this meant was that the spiritual character of a whole people and nation was built up inwardly, from the inside. Those words were in our blood. By their repetition, by their affectionate familiarity, our faith was strengthened. We did not merely know them *by rote* – horrible expression – we knew them *by heart*. And think of this: the only things you really know are what you know by heart.

And this knowing was not an individual, isolated thing. We knew these words together. Our solidarity was thus created and built up. Our Christian faith took on a form that we could touch and feel. It was within us. The Kingdom of God was within us. And these words from the Bible and the Prayer Book were not just Sunday words. They found their way into our daily conversation. Common prayer was at one with common speech. And in the fields and in the pub we might say *fell by the wayside; the devil and all his works; dead and buried; the world, the flesh and the devil; in sickness and in health; earth to earth; some fell on stony ground..*

Now to try to change this way of life, this way of being, would be like trying to change the seasons of the year. In his recent book *Who Killed the Bible?* Ian Robinson draws our attention to a vivid verse from the Old Testament:

Behold, the name of the Lord cometh from far, burning with his anger, and the burden thereof is heavy: his lips are full of indignation and his tongue as a devouring fire

And then he tells us what this verse has become in the modern, so called *Good News Bible*:

Look, God's on his way and from a long way off! Smoking with anger, immense as he comes into view, words steaming from his mouth, searing, indicting words

Robinson comments, *Tell me another! Is this God or Stephenson's Rocket?*

It becomes laughable. Or look at what the new illiterate prayer book did with the *Nunc Dimittis*: Where we were used to saying *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace* the daft new book has *Lord now you let your servant go* – which sounds like someone not in distress of soul but of bladder. Or consider the unbelievably naff *New English Bible*. What does it do with the haunting phrase *wolves in sheep's clothing*? It says instead *men dressed up as sheep*. I'm not making this up. *Arise, take up thy bed and walk* becomes *Take up your pallet and go home* – which just sounds like advice to a sloppy painter.

So to answer Ian Robinson's question *Who Killed the Bible?* - we did. Or rather the Bishops and the Synod stopped prescribing the real Bible and the real Prayer Book and they brought in the terrible new books. This was an act of iconoclasm, of

vandalism, as bad as if they had knocked down the parish churches. Worse, because it destroyed our spiritual character from the inside. It removed that shared consciousness that bound us together as Christian people in England. Effectively, the Bishops and the Synod have destroyed the Church of England. They have mutilated our solidarity. They have undermined our faith. It means that our children no longer know any prayers by heart. They have ruptured our historical development by cutting us off from the words – and thus the experience – of our grandparents.

They were all for modernity, these Bishops – but my God they kept their ancient copes and mitres! They will have to answer for what they have done, for all they have undone. The miracle is that, even after forty years of iconoclasm, they have not been able to expunge the familiar words entirely. Have you noticed, when the tabloid newspapers print a churchy story or they discover someone in the wrong bed, they still use old phrases like *sin* and *thou shalt not*?

This shows that the Church of England can be restored. We must go on using the proper words. No use firing with blank cartridges. Other churches as well as ours are returning to the proper words. Perhaps we are just beginning to creep out of a vicious darkness? Perhaps we are beginning to see the enormity of what we have done? The modern Church of England has collapsed. It has fallen utterly apart. In any fresh alliances we make with our fellow Christians worldwide, we must make sure that the priceless living heritage of the real Church of England is not just preserved but lived here and now. These are the words of life. There is nowhere else to go.