

Sermon: the Person of Jesus. Trinity XIII 2006

The BBC moves in a mysterious way, its wonders to perform. Last Monday afternoon there was that nice Ernie Rae's religious discussion on Radio Four called *Beyond Belief*. Well, the title makes you think they've made up their minds beforehand, doesn't it? The subject of the programme was the character of Jesus, so I thought I would listen – against my best instincts because this series usually has me wanting to chuck the wireless into the street.

Monday was no exception. The BBC used to work to the assumption that Britain is a Christian country. Not any more. All religions and cults now have to be treated exactly alike according to the canons of political correctness. So they are going to talk about Jesus? So they assemble a Jew, a Muslim and an expert on eastern religions. The Jew didn't think there was anything very original about Jesus' teaching. The eastern bloke and the Jew didn't believe in the Virgin Birth. None of them believed in the Resurrection. And the Muslim didn't even believe that Jesus had been crucified.

What they all agreed on was that Jesus really taught us that we should get in touch with our inner selves. In other words, they were all three thoroughly fashionable modern sceptics. They always start with human psychology. What would they say – I can't think – if I suggested they ought to start with the Gospels and the doctrines of the Creed? So here are three theologians falling over one another to believe as little as possible, and snobbishly to delight in debunking the person of Jesus – with a lots of *of course's*, winks and nudges. It's destructive and rather insane. They'd never get three physicists on a science programme to say they didn't believe in gravity or the second law of thermodynamics. What next – *Hamlet* without the prince? Cricket without the bat and ball?

Even so, I am grateful for that daft, irritating, biased and preposterous programme. For it turned my mind back to a basic question which I'd like us to think about this morning: the person of Jesus – what is he really like? If you ask most people, they will tell you that he was a kind man who loved peace. He did say, didn't he, *Blessed are the peacemakers*? He did tell us to love one another. But how many remember that Jesus who said, *Blessed are the peacemakers* also said, *Think not that I come to bring peace, but a sword*? And before his arrest he told his disciples to go and find swords for themselves.

When we actually open the Gospels you see, our unexamined prejudices about the character of Jesus are undermined by the evidence we find there. He was rough with the Scribes and Pharisees calling them *hypocrites, blind guides, whited sepulchres which indeed appear beautiful outward but are within full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness*. But Jesus also dined with Scribes and Pharisees, had conversation and made merry with them – even to the extent that, as Jesus himself said, he got the reputation as *a drunkard and a wine-bibber*.

If you listen to the bishops – or to those other great theological experts Bob Geldof and Bono – you come away convinced that Jesus was a friend of the poor and condemned the rich. But there are plenty of accounts in the Gospel of how Jesus sat at meat with rich men. Joseph of Arimathea, who begged the Lord's body from Pilate, was one of the wealthiest men around – and a disciple.

I wonder how long it will be before that nice Dave Cameron has Jesus as a fully paid up member of the Greens? Well yes, Jesus did ask us to *consider the lilies of the field* but, in what looks like a fit of rage, he also cursed the fig tree so that it became barren and died. He did say that God cares for the birds of the air, even for the little sparrows. But remember the Gadarene swine. Jesus sent them *violently down a steep place into the lake and were choked*. Oh dear – whatever would the RSPCA say? Gadarene swine indeed – don't let the animal rights fanatics hear about it! Where would the parable of the Prodigal Son be without the fatted calf? But veggies don't kill the fatted calf. Say it not to the Five Fruits and Vegetables a Day Enforcer.

So what we actually find when we look into the Gospels is that *Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild* is a cliché and a caricature. The truth is more complicated. The Jew, the Muslim and the eastern bloke on Radio Four had a good go at psychoanalysing Jesus, interpreting his teaching in a psychological style. Very well, let's take a leaf out their book. Let's do what Sigmund Freud did and go right back to Jesus in his childhood and his relationship with his Mother.

The first we hear of this is a colossal piece of cheek and insubordination when he stays behind in the temple at the age of twelve. His Mother is at her wits' end with anxiety, the whole caravan turned round seeking him for three days. And Mary gets the cheeky reply: *How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?* The psychoanalyst would have to say that Jesus' relationship with his Mother was *problematic*. What does he say to her when she makes that request at the wedding in Cana? *Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come*. In fact his whole family relationships were not exactly smooth. Bystanders said to Jesus *Thy Mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee*. And Jesus' reply? *Who is my Mother? Who are my brethren?*

The problem with current interpretations of Jesus' character is that they all try to force him into their own mould. They deny the miracles, the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, of course, and make Jesus out to be a gentle teacher of platitudes, of what we know already: love is better than hate, forgiveness is better than bearing grudges, a little bit of kindness goes a long way. We know all those things. They are morally obvious and undeniable. The modern interpreters – like those three unwise men on Radio Four – try to pass Jesus off as one of themselves: perfectly reasonable and urbane – and entirely without imagination or spirit.

No doubt their Jesus would be against globalisation and in favour of aid to African dictators and naturally against the war in Iraq. He wouldn't vote for Bush or Blair, or go foxhunting, or smoke, or be sexist. Their Jesus would believe firmly in best practice, health and safety, full compliance, equal opportunities and diversity training. So they make Jesus falsely in their own image – leaving out the bits of the Gospel they don't like.

But what if the miracles all happened as the Gospels say they did? And there was a Virgin Birth? And there was a Resurrection? Let us mention just in passing some of the sayings of Jesus which the modern critics ignore. What about the Jesus who said, *Whosoever's sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever's sins ye retain, they are retained*.

What when they asked him, *Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?* Did Jesus modestly deny he was – in line with sceptical modern scholarship? No he said, *I am: and ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven.*

What about the Jesus who raised Jairus' daughter and Lazarus? What about when he said, *Before Abraham was, I am.* He also said, *I and the Father are one.* By what right do the modern sceptics merely omit the bits of the Gospel that don't suit their unexamined prejudices?

When we read the Gospels in their entirety, we are not allowed to come away thinking that Jesus was a nice, kind man who taught the blinking obvious, told us all to be nice to each other and get in touch with our inner selves – like Bel Mooney in *The Times*. He didn't, as the sceptics claim, just wander about Galilee performing psychological tricks and curing people of their psychosomatic illnesses. Jesus made remarkable claims about himself, most outrageously that he was God and that at the Last Day he will come to judge the quick and the dead, take the sheep to heaven and send the goats to hellfire.

You can read the Gospels and say that such a man was a preposterous megalomaniac and mad. What you can't say is that he was just a nice man with a few special gifts – just like those nice people in the Radio Four studio in fact. For my part, I believe the Gospels and the record of the church over 2000 years. Time and time again throughout history there is clear evidence that God has revealed himself in Jesus and that Jesus is still a living presence. As St John puts it, *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*