

Over the last few weeks, a great number of people have asked me what's going on in the Church of England these days: the implication and tone of these enquiries suggesting that all is not well. Indeed, it is not at all well. I should like to try to offer some explanation of what has gone wrong. But the catastrophic farce into which the church has descended did not happen overnight. So you will have to listen to a bit of history – not much - but for this I beg your patience.

Let us go back to, say, 1958. The Church of England was enjoying a period of confident expansion. Congregations were on the increase. The habit of Parish Communion was replacing Matins and enlivening churches everywhere. Christenings and weddings were up. Ordinations to the priesthood were up. In the working class parish of Armley, Leeds, where I was raised, there were three of us who had offered ourselves to the priesthood. To re-apply William Wordsworth: *bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, and to be young was very heaven.*

Let us look at this scene. One of the most constructive, creative and unifying aspects of the church was that throughout it used *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer*. This was a sort of happy genius, for these same books were used by all three parties in the church: High, Low and Broad. Then the authorities started to tinker with this happy arrangement and the decline set in. They were bent on making new versions of the Bible and the first of these was the New Testament part of *The New English Bible* which was published in 1961. This version is illiterate and in many places laughable.

As, for instance, when the *King James's Son of Belial* (that is the devil himself) is rendered by the *New English Bible* as a *good- for- nothing* (I Samuel 25: 25)? What, the son of the devil himself is only a good- for-nothing – like a truant from the fourth form who has been stealing apples from the housemaster's orchard! There isn't time to give you dozens of other examples of idiocy in the new versions of Scripture, but I devote a chapter to this in my book *A Partial Vision: Christianity and the Great Betrayal*. Buy one today and laugh all week...

Having emasculated Holy Writ, the authorities then devoted themselves to the ruin of public worship by the invention of jiving-for-Jesus, Noddy, services vastly inferior to *The Book of Common Prayer* which had proved its worth in every parish in the land for 300 years. Why, you may ask, did the hierarchy of the church perpetrate this destruction? Simply because they liked the sound of their own voices or, as Thomas Cranmer puts it in his *Preface to The Book of Common Prayer*, they were, *such men who always had more regard for their private fancies than for that duty they owe to the public.*

But the full story of this desecration is truly scandalous. In 1980 the bishops and synod put all these pathetic services into a new publication called *The Alternative Service Book*. At the time, they advertised this book as *the greatest publishing event in 400 years*. Twenty years later the bishops and synod actually banned – yes, officially banned – *The Alternative Service Book* and replaced it with something even more barbarous called *Common Worship*. So, first the sidelining of *The King James Bible* and then the destruction of the *Common Prayer* which had sustained the whole church for centuries.

But there was, if you can credit it, a greater evil to come and it is this that I want to tell you about now. The authorities were not content merely to dumb down worship and produce illiterate versions of the Bible: they decided that the church must be secularised. Suddenly, theological paperback books became all the rage. These were some of the titles: *Objections to Christian Belief*; *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*; *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*; *But That I Can't Believe!*; *Radical Theology and the Death of God* And, most successful of the lot, *Honest to God* by John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich. He launched this iconoclastic book with a long article on the front of *The Observer* newspaper entitled *Our Image of God Must Go*.

In his book, Robinson sought thoroughly to undermine our notions of the being of God. Let me quote from him: *In place of a God who is literally or physically 'up there' we have accepted, as part of our mental furniture, a God who is spiritually or metaphysically 'out there'.*" (*Honest to God*, p.13). But Christians for 2000 years had held as their core belief the objective, metaphysical existence of God. *Honest to God* was an explicit denial of this. Robinson's book was catastrophic in another way. In chapter six Robinson denies the authority of the Ten Commandments and says that instead our moral decisions should be guided by what he called *situation ethics*. In other words, you make up your own morality on the hoof. This appalling book had enormous influence, going into half a dozen reprints in as many months

A few years later, Christian priests and theologians published *The Myth of God Incarnate* which denied the traditional view of Jesus as God and Man. It is crucial to notice that these new trends – the virtual abolition of *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer* and the denial and abandonment of Christian orthodoxy – were most enthusiastically taken up by the most prominent people in the church; bishops, deans, principals of theological colleges and the like.

You might say that the Church of England effectively resigned. But the iconoclasts and virtual atheists who became the new Establishment were left with a big problem on their hands. If you denied, as they did, that Scripture and traditional church teaching actually meant what they said, what did you do with the words of the Bible and the doctrines of the Christian Fathers? Answer: in the phrase used by Professor Rudolf Bultmann of the University of Marburg, you *demythologised* them.

Let me spell out what this means practically. Take the feeding of the five thousand. Obviously, the new non-believing theologians could not by any means accept that this was one of Our Lord's miracles, but there it remains in the Bible – so what to do with it? Answer, turn it into a banal story about *sharing* and make it part of a socialist ideology which grew and developed into today's rampant egalitarianism and levelling down.

What about the resurrection of Christ? They didn't believe it. But there it stubbornly remains in all four gospels. So what to make of it? What they did was to deny that it happened and instead psychologise and subjectify it. These leaders, who were supposed to be our spiritual fathers in God, our religious teachers and defenders of the faith, did not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. So they said instead that after his death *his disciples experienced new life*. Thus they left entirely unanswered where this experience of new life came from if Jesus remained dead. And it left unanswered the other question too: would the first Christian men and women really preach what they knew to be a lie? Would they really have had the courage to suffer martyrdom for what they knew was a cock-and-bull story?

This secularisation of Christianity has accelerated over the years so that the church is now run by practical atheists. This is why you never hear many of our bishops and other senior clergy speak directly about scripture or the doctrines of the Creed. They don't believe what the Bible and the Creeds actually say. And so they retreat and re-interpret Christian doctrine in terms of the secular opinions of our time. And these opinions are always merely political. And of course they are always the fashionable left wing prejudices of the day.

This is why we hear from the bishops' palaces, the archdeaconries and the theological colleges endless palaver about *diversity, equality, under-privilege, deprivation, social exclusion, saving the planet* and all the rest. If you don't believe in God who is a metaphysical reality; if you believe the feeding of the five thousand was a socialist picnic; if you think the resurrection was a mere shift in the disciples' mood; then there is nothing left for you to engage with than the secular dogmas of this world.

Even this is not enough for the new brand of non-believing leaders of our church. They love above all things to discover the biggest universal delusion of the age – and identify themselves with it. So in the 1980s this was unilateral nuclear disarmament and now it is climate change. The church has been reduced to an un-theological, bureaucratic, box-ticking, politically-correct irrelevance. That is why, to take an example close at hand, the campsite outside St Paul's looms so large. The hierarchy, having divested itself of fundamental belief, has nothing else to do.

To sum up: the church has lost its confidence in its own basic teachings and in its theological and dogmatic authority. Have you noticed how *dogma* nowadays is only a dirty word? We need a return to fundamental Christian faith. God only knows where and when such a return might begin.