

Communication of the Gospel within the Church

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In considering the issue of communication of the gospel within the church it is evident that there are no simple solutions to what is a very serious problem which needs to be faced as a matter of some urgency.

Since leaving active stipendiary parish Ministry (and becoming a member of the disenfranchised retired clergy) one has observed changes and fashions in doing things of which one has no experience e.g. "Fresh Expressions", "Pioneer Ministry" and "Messy Church" as examples. All these stem from a desire to communicate the gospel message and improve the relationship between people and the church and, more particularly, increase the numbers who are actively involved the church through attendance at worship. All this activity has brought home to one the fact that one's personal knowledge and understanding of the faith was born of and nurtured in a different society and a different century. My faith was shaped and grounded in a different society at a different time which has led in current circumstances to almost a sense of exile.

There is no instant solution to the problem we face of communicating the gospel in the 21st-century. There is also a need to look again at what it is we mean by that which we label "The Gospel" if we seek to continue to teach it, preach it and live it as Christians and members of the church – both institutionally and spiritually.. With some notable exceptions, churches are presently in a state of decline with ageing congregations, reducing incomes and reductions in the number of priests in deaneries who now apparently spend time chasing around multi-parish benefices. The Ordinal and its demands remain, so presumably the role of priests and ordained ministers remain – that of being under shepherds knowing their flocks. It is evident that the gospel being offered is not one which speaks to society in the 21st-century and we still have to take the gospel, which continues to be an affront to the world, to a society which does not appear to have an overtly conscious need of any God.

One's own position is that of looking back to what now appears almost an alien world and society. One recognises that it was one which "processed" people, including me, into basic knowledge of the Christian faith as part of an expression of its *raison d'être*.. Not being brought up as a member of a family which was in any sense regular in churchgoing, children were nevertheless sent to Sunday school. That said, my parents certainly regarded themselves as Christians in outlook and belief living in a Christian society. We siblings were baptised into the Anglican Church, in my case at three weeks old following my mother being churched. Sunday school was a obligatory and, in my own case from being three years of age, a weekly basis. This continued until I left school and Sunday school (by this time a discussion group for late adolescence) around the ages of 16 or 17. Day school education was through local church schools, both primary and middle schools, which were the only choices in those days available. The only choice effectively came at the age of 11 when scholarship examinations determined one's future via grammar school, modern school or technical college.

From the age 11 the church's involvement in the educational system was very evident and particularly at a middle school level involving weekly visits by clergy and occasional school services in church. One recalls even being taught psalms and they're pointing. At grammar school there was provision for religious education and the Chaplain did an annual cull of potential candidates for confirmation. The upshot of all this was that by the time one left school and Sunday school there had been a reasonable grounding in Christian belief and whilst probably a majority one's contemporaries did not become active church members following confirmation they nevertheless became adults in a society which was considered broadly Christian. Even so most

active connection with the church, after leaving school, was probably through Rites of Passage. In my case, renewed following marriage.

This involvement ultimately led to training as a diocesan reader and after some 17 years led to ordination (very reluctantly initially). As initially a non-stipendiary priest, it seems that I was almost predestined to be, at worst a nominal church attending Christian (like most members of our average church congregations). But it was in my childhood and educational system that the ground was nevertheless laid when I was taught and nurtured in the educational system in the rudiments of the faith.

The most significant realisation which came out my training for the priesthood was the exposure to academic theological thought and critical biblical analysis at a level previously not experienced. That is when it was born in on me that, “as a child I thought and was taught and spoke as a child and now I was a man and needed put away childish thinking learning and teaching and must think and discern and wrestle with the knowledge and the responsibility of being a man of faith”

Both in training and in continuing study after ordination thinking expressed in “Honest to God” by John Robinson, the reflections of the Bishop of Durham on the virgin birth, names like Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Bultman, to mention one or two, and even Dr Spong came as revelations to me and I realised that some different theological thinking had been discussed and generally well accepted in academic common rooms for some considerable time. From this eventually emerged a strong realisation of a need to take some of that thinking about Scripture, theology and doctrine “out of the academic closet” and used to nourish the understanding of Christians living in a much changed society.

Having completed initial training to enter the Ministry and preach the gospel et al one discovers that there is a dichotomy between exposition of the Scripture as these have been traditionally taught from the pulpit and elsewhere since the Reformation and beyond but which now, in the light of increased human knowledge and understanding ,conflict with tradition. One is faced with either challenging the faith of people who would almost certainly be very badly affected and threatened by exposure to thinking which hitherto has been presented to them in absolute terms and might even cause them to abandon their “simple” faith.

The communication of the gospel i.e. it’s teaching at a basic level in the church is not about attempting to turn the laity into ordinands but recognising that two threads of activity – communicating the gospel within the church and academic study involved in preparing ministers to serve in it must be processes which have to proceed in parallel but interact with each other more positively than at present.

In the 21st century, in an increasingly secular community the literal approach to Scripture based upon an assumption that the Bible is in errant seems to be attractive in those areas where the church thriving in terms of numbers. Presumably this is because it provides simple moral and ethical choices derived from literal interpretation of Scripture. This Is surprising because it tunes with what might be described as a binary society influenced greatly by computer science, technology and its accompanying system of absolute logic – ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and is more attractive than ‘perhaps’ or ‘it all depends’ because it offers a level of certainty which in truth is not justifiable the world and creation as we now understand them.

From all this comes the basic question of what is it that we are teaching in the name of Christ as his gospel – if we are even teaching it at all?. What formal teaching is there amongst the young and not so young in matters of faith and understanding of Scripture? Do we continue to

offer the “grown-ups” in the congregations the milk of childhood rather than the meat and seasoning of adult reality?

Clearly the clock cannot be put back to earlier times – which were never probably as golden as we may like to think – but they were really different times and we have forgotten some of the lessons of the past that the faith has to be taught and cannot be absorbed, as it were, by osmosis. We live in a post-Thatcherite society (so-called) possessed of a definite secularism and sense of individualism and there have been three, possibly four generations with little or no knowledge of the scriptures and the gospel message beyond a type of folk religion based upon Christmas and, to a lesser extent, Easter. It can be argued that in society there is presently a general view that the claiming of a divine or religious role as a basis for shaping ethics and morality and contributing to answers to life’s questions is resented, or at best suspected, – even, as the Bible reminds us, those branded as terrorists believe that they do God’s will according to their lights and understanding of their faith..

In order to communicate the Gospel and teach and preach it and, most of all, to live it in a way that is meaningful in the 21st-century rather we need to go back to teaching and communicating the gospel more clearly within the church and unburdening ourselves of some of the traditional interpretations of Scripture and a theological understandings of bygone times which are no longer intellectually sustainable in the 21st-century. Only then might we have a gospel to communicate If which will be relevant to the society in which we presently live.
