

EASTER

The scene is an old people's home in Driffield on a Wednesday morning before Palm Sunday. Holy Communion was being celebrated in the fairly large lounge. A slight whiff of urine in the air, several members of the congregation were asleep and at least two were having continuous bouts of coughing. Not an ideal setting for the contemplation of the divine presence. Nevertheless these were real people each of whom had a reason for being there and a hope that the event would be interesting, if not, inspiring and even therapeutic.

During the distribution of the elements I was being assisted by Katharine. As we moved around the room, I administered the wafers and Katharine followed closely charged with the more difficult task of administering the wine. About three minutes into this procedure I heard one lady ask Katharine in a loud anxious voice, "What does all this mean?" For an instant I was able to see the whole ceremony through the eyes of this rather dazed and bemused lady.

As I drove home the question kept insisting itself upon me, "What does all this mean?"

Since the time when the first woman, several million years ago, straightened her back and began to walk in an upright position, she has been asking that profound question, "What does all this mean?" The psalmist repeats the longing which we have for meaning when he writes:

'When I consider thy heavens, the works of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;
What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.'

Psalm 8: 3 – 5.

As I approach my retirement after 25 years of ministry as a Priest in the Anglican Church, I feel compelled to try to make sense of many of the traditional teachings of the Church. This I do for two reasons. First I feel the need to clarify my own thoughts with regard to the Christian Faith and secondly to communicate my convictions and my doubts to my friends.

What makes Anglicanism distinct from other Christian denominations is the insistence, which comes from its Benedictine influence, that all our doctrine is based upon the triangle of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. The importance of Scripture is that in the Old and New Testaments we have a

record of the history and development of an understanding of God which forms the basis for all our teaching. By Tradition we do not mean an imprisonment in the past, but a moving stream of principles and practice which link us with the past foundations of our faith. And by Reason, we mean that we are always involved in a search for understanding. It is not good enough simply to say, for example, that we believe that 'Jesus died for our sins' because the Bible tells me so. As Anglican Christians we need to explore that statement and try to understand how it works. In what way does the death of Jesus lead to forgiveness of our sins? This, I believe, is the great strength of the Anglican way of being Christian. We may not know all the answers, but we are prepared to ask the questions.

Some years ago when I was a teacher of Mathematics, a student asked me a very strange question during a lecture on Trigonometry. He asked, "If you are a Christian, then why are you not a Moslem also?" As this had nothing to do with Trigonometry I asked him to see me later in my study. There I learned that he was a Moslem and his understanding of Christianity led him to believe that Jesus was a prophet who prepared the way for Mohammed. I explained to him that I believed that Jesus was the divine Son of God and that he died for my sins. My student was very confused by this, and he expressed horror at the idea that I, and other Christians, believed in human sacrifice.

If the death of Jesus was in some way a sacrifice to appease a God who was angry with me for the sins which I had committed, my Moslem friend would have none of it. After this experience, I was less inclined to speak of the sacrifice of Christ, and I was forced to rethink my attitude to the theory of atonement.

I believe that our faith must be based on reason if it is to be credible in the 21st century. It is no longer acceptable to say that we believe in something 'because the Bible tells us so'. This way leads to a blind Biblical fundamentalism which is intellectual suicide. The world needs a credible faith which is relevant – a faith which helps us to understand and to cope with the tragedies and confusions of our world. Through modern technology, we are more exposed to the complexities and the sufferings of the world than any other generation on earth. We must therefore, have a reason for the faith which is in us, otherwise we have no way of communicating that faith to others in this suffering world. We have no way of helping people to make sense of their life's problems.

Well, you may say, I don't need to intellectualise my beliefs. It is sufficient for me to say 'I believe and trust in him'. I am content with my simple faith. To this I am bound to ask, "What do you mean when you say that you love God with all your mind"? And what do you have to say to that dear lady in Driffield who, crying out for meaning, asked, "What does all this mean?"

AMEN