

Living with Questions

Welcome, especially to those of you who are new to 'Cornflakes Theology'; the basic concept of which arose as a result of a list of questions which was written early one morning on the back of a cornflakes packet by Mary Mason in 2002. The copy of these questions is available on request. The last of Mary's questions was directed to me as her parish priest, 'Do you tolerate 'doubting Thomas' in your Church? I wish to know.'

Jesus inherited a rich religious tradition with its central place of worship, its festivals, customs and prayers. But the impression we get from the gospel of Luke especially is that Jesus did not mindlessly or uncritically go through the motions of religious practice as many of his contemporaries did. According to Luke 2: 41f Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem at the appropriate time, 'as was their custom.' When they had done everything they were supposed to do they returned home. Jesus, a lad of twelve, stayed in Jerusalem, hanging around the Temple for three days, asking questions of those who were supposed to be experts. Clearly they were not childish questions, but went to the very heart of things. We can imagine the rabbis being put on the spot with questions they had never even thought of and having to scratch their heads to come up with an answer. As a grandfather of three grandsons I can sympathise with them. Woe betide them if the answers turned out to be 'spin'! They were being grilled by a young Socrates.? Did Jesus at the age of twelve already present a critical attitude

to the religious teachings and practices he had been introduced to by his parents? I wonder if Jesus' insistence on the importance of children (Luke 9:46 - 48, Matt.18:1-5, Mark 9:33-37) has its origin in that experience in his own youthful days when he had his first encounter with the religious institution! It is not without significance that St. Luke begins and ends the account with reference to the fact that Jesus, from that moment, 'grew both in body and wisdom, gaining favour with God and men.' (Vss. 40 and 52).

The famous fable by Hans Christian Anderson concerning the Emperor's suit of clothes, is a vivid example of the courage involved in questioning firmly held beliefs.

'The emperor marched in the procession under the beautiful canopy, and all who saw him in the street and out of the windows exclaimed: "Indeed, the emperor's new suit is incomparable! What a long train he has! How well it fits him!" Nobody wished to let others know he saw nothing, for then he would have been unfit for his office or too stupid. Never were the emperor's clothes more admired.

"But he has nothing on at all," said a little child at last. "Good heavens! Listen to the voice of an innocent child," said the father, and one whispered to the other what the child had said. "But he has nothing on at all," cried at last the whole people. That made a deep impression upon the emperor, for it seemed to him that they were right; but he thought to himself, "Now I must bear up to the end." And the chamberlains walked

with still greater dignity, as if they carried the train which did not exist.'

It was a child who, perhaps in his innocence, pointed out the gross nature of power and control.

Many years after St. Luke wrote his Gospel in the fourth and fifth centuries when Christianity had become accepted as the religion of the Empire, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Creed of St. Athanasius attempted to lay down the fundamental beliefs of all Christians. Failure to commit to these creeds was punishable by excommunication or damnation or death. Hence it was not surprising that from that time on, Christians were reluctant to ask questions of a theological nature. In fact it was not until the Enlightenment dawned that people like Galileo, Newton and Darwin and other eminent scientists and philosophers began to question the basic tenets of the Christian faith. This so called **Age of Reason** was a cultural movement of intellectuals in 18th century Europe, that sought to mobilize the power of reason, in order to reform society and advance knowledge. It promoted science and intellectual interchange and opposed superstition,¹ intolerance and abuses in church and state. Since the Victorian period the church has reacted by turning to absolute authority in the form of Papal Infallibility or Biblical inerrancy in the search for certainty - or the lust for certainty - as Bishop David Jenkins once described this phenomenon. Hence if questions are asked of a vaguely

radical nature in church groups, they are generally met with hostility.

Outside the church community, society is described by sociologists as 'Post-Christian'. People in general in the West are indifferent about religion and view the Church as a cult which is mainly concerned about its internal problems. The atheist Richard Dawkins in his book 'The God Delusion' published in 2006 has assisted in promoting atheism and has become a worldwide bestseller.

I believe that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift in the way we understand salvation history. If so, the task of theology will be more than ever a constructive task. The responsibility of the theologian will be to help us discern what is essential to the Christian faith and to express it in the language and thought forms of our generation.

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