

Week 1 - The Courage to Speak Out

We have all heard the famous fable by Hans Christian Anderson concerning the Emperor's suit of clothes. It is a vivid portrayal of the courage which is demanded of the individual who would venture to proclaim the truth as he/she sees it and also the power of conformity.

Ask someone to read... '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 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.

The fable serves to remind us that the Christian Church does not always encourage a critical, questioning attitude. Throughout its history, many who have questioned the teaching of the church have been persecuted, tortured or martyred. From the 4th century when Christian beliefs were enshrined in the Nicene Creed, The Apostles Creed and later the Creed of St. Athanasius, the persecution of heretics became a characteristic of the Church's mission; one has only to think of the times of the Spanish Inquisition or the public burning of so-called heretics in the City of Oxford, that great place of learning, to remember how wickedly the Christian Church has behaved. Do we ask ourselves why?

The creed of St. Athanasius is a typical and vicious response to the threat of heresy which existed in those times and which still prevails in many parts of the church. It begins with.....

*'Whosoever will be saved; before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled; **without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.**'*

It goes on to state '*...and the Catholic Faith is.....*'.

Leader starter comments – (Circulate copy of St. Athanasius Creed with introduction and/or BCP prayer book.) This makes stark reading.

Is it from a Church determined to be in control?

Is it in accordance with a God of anger or a God of love?

As Christians, in what sense do we believe that Jesus is our Saviour?

Discuss

In recent years, the persecution of heretics is not physically violent as in the past.

However, theologians like Bishop John Robinson, author of 'Honest to God', published 50 years ago, in 1963, and more recently Bishop David Jenkins, both of the Church of England and Bishop John Shelby Spong of the Episcopal Church of the USA, have all suffered **verbal abuse** from many Church leaders and lay members.

In 1979, the Swiss theologian, Hans Küng, was stripped of the authority to teach Catholic theology by Pope John Paul II. Why? Because he dared to question the concept of papal infallibility, the doctrine of the 'Virgin Birth', and the doctrine of the 'Immaculate Conception', which claims that Mary herself was immaculately conceived by a mother who is not named in either the New Testament or in the Old Testament.

Küng also suggests that Jesus may have been mistaken regarding the coming of the end of the world (referred to as 'the Apocalypse'). Chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel is often called 'the little Apocalypse' and in it Jesus is quoted as saying that the end of the world will come during the lifetime of the disciples. (*Good News Bible, MarkCh.13 Verse 14.*)

Leader starter comments: - Hans Küng makes four highly controversial statements here.

He questions the infallibility of the Pope;

He questions the doctrine of the Virgin Birth,

He questions the Immaculate Conception of Mary herself

and he questions the fact that Jesus was in error to suggest that those present would witness the Apocalypse.

Was he right to question these things?

Discuss

Persecution by the Church is not reserved for Theologians. Scientists have also suffered greatly whenever it was seen by the Church hierarchy that scientific discoveries appeared to challenge Christian doctrine. Three famous examples are Galileo, Darwin, and Pythagoras.

Galileo. He was born on 15 February 1564 near Pisa, the son of a musician. In 1609, he heard about the invention of the telescope in Holland. Without having seen an example, he constructed a superior version and made many astronomical discoveries. These included mountains and valleys on the surface of the moon, sunspots; the four largest moons of the planet Jupiter and the phases of the planet Venus. His work on astronomy made him famous and he was appointed court mathematician in Florence.

It was in 1614, that Galileo was accused of heresy for his support of the Copernican theory that the sun was at the centre of the solar system. This was revolutionary at a time when most people believed the Earth was in this central position. In 1616, he was forbidden by the church from teaching or advocating these theories.

In 1632, Galileo was again condemned for heresy after his book 'Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems' was published. This set out the arguments for and against the Copernican theory in the form of a discussion between two men. Today we may think this a fair enough topic for discussion but no, Galileo was summoned to appear before the Inquisition in Rome. He was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, later reduced to permanent house arrest at his villa in Arcetri, south of Florence. He was also forced to publicly withdraw his support for Copernican theory.

Charles Darwin, who laid the foundations of the theory of evolution and transformed the way we think about the natural world is still regarded as a heretic by many Christian fundamentalists and his teaching is prohibited in many schools in the USA. The Vatican stated its official position in a 1950 papal encyclical, which held that evolution was not inconsistent with Catholic teaching.

Pythagoras, who incidentally was believed to have been born of a virgin, is well known as the father of mathematics and the discoverer of the famous right angled triangle theorem. He also founded a cult called the 'Pythagoreans'. Their basic creed claimed that every physical entity could be defined in terms of whole numbers. One of their members had the courage to raise the question of the length of the diagonal of a square. A unit square has a diagonal of length equal to the square root of two. (this is an irrational number ie: it cannot be expressed exactly in terms of whole numbers). The questioner was drowned for his sins! (*'The Emperor has no clothes on....!'*)

The persecution of those who have the courage of their convictions has a long history. Whenever old ideas are challenged, whether theological or scientific, many religious people react with anger and sometimes, as we know, with great cruelty. Even within the loving and forgiving church community there are many who refuse to deal with change.....

Whenever the Church wields power over people instead of carrying out a service to them; whenever its institutions, creeds and laws become ends in themselves; whenever its leaders hand out personal opinions and requests as if they were divine precepts and directives; whenever these things happen, the Church's mission is impaired and betrayed. Objecting to such abuse of power and authority is however a task which requires both faith and courage.

Questions for discussion

- 1 Have you ever been in a position where you felt it necessary to speak out on a particular issue?**
- 2 Why was Jesus crucified?**
- 3 When an institution becomes powerful, moral decisions tend to be made with regard to the well-being of the institution itself. Discuss**

