

## Time for a rethink?

Some time back I was at a CofE/Methodist unity service where the Methodist preacher bemoaned the fact that congregations were shrinking at an alarming rate. He went on to say that what the church taught could not be changed and that it was increasingly in conflict with secular society's insistence on human rights (ref the Church's position on homosexuality). As I have always thought of human rights as a good thing this bothered me.

Having thought it through I can only call it the way I see it. In the Old Testament God adopts the role of a stern father who sets down rules of behaviour and is feared by his earthly children who placate him with sacrifice. By the time of Jesus some leading Jewish factions, full of their own importance, had reduced religion to a set of tick boxes. For example the disciples were criticised for plucking ears of corn on a Sunday. Now the Jews hated and despised the Samaritans yet Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan to an audience of Jews who had grown up believing that they were God's chosen people. Jesus was saying that having compassion is more important even than being a Jew. That a Samaritan with compassion is better than a Jew who has not, even a Jew who ticked all the religious boxes - a priest. If Jesus told the story in Israel today I wonder whether it would be the story of the good Palestinian? It really was provocative. It's a wonder they didn't string him up! - come to think of it they did didn't they. We are told nothing about the religion, race, or social status of the man who was set upon by robbers so we must conclude that everyone is our neighbour.

What I see in Jesus' ministry is not a different God but a change in tactic on the part of God. Instead of a stern father he is now the loving father. Instead of "Thou shalt not... or you will feel my anger" we are told what we **should** do - Love God and love our neighbour as ourselves - and we will be rewarded with God's love and eternal life. Jesus says - "On these hang all the law and the prophets" because the rules hadn't changed. If you love your neighbour then you are not going to kill him, steal from him, tell lies about him, envy him his possessions or hop into bed with his wife. Jesus replaces these rules with the goal the rules were intended to achieve. In fact he makes us aim higher. Instead of rules intended to prevent people being nasty to each other, the aim now is to be actively nice to one another. It is surely a recipe for a perfect world.

A year or two back I was saddened by the death of Sister Wendy Beckett - best known as an art expert - but a very thoughtful and interesting person. Once, while standing in front of a painting she said "really there is only one sin, misusing your fellow man." It was one of those light bulb moments for me. Jesus had replaced a set of rules which said how you shouldn't behave by instructions on how you should. A sin is therefore doing something not in keeping with loving one's neighbour. We have a criteria by which we can judge what is a sin and what isn't instead of a tick list. The Bible does not say driving recklessly is a sin but it is whether someone is injured or not because it is endangering a neighbour. Damaging the planet is a sin because it is misusing generations to come. Adultery is a sin because one of the people involved is breaking a promise and so is misusing his or her partner and the other party is complicit in that action.

Marriage ensures that if a child is born it has the support of two parents who are in a stable relationship. Fornication was a sin as it was behaviour which could result in a baby being born who isn't wanted and has not the parental support it deserves: behaviour which could be detrimental for the baby. Since the invention of reliable contraception, responsible sex is no longer "behaviour which could result in a baby being born.....". Is it still a sin? It is important that the Church thinks about this because our society has changed and today it is not possible for young people to pair off for life at the age nature intended. Scholars tell us that when Jesus was born his mother would probably be 15 or 16.

The biggest issue in the public mind which divides the Church from secular society is homosexuality which is not contrary to anything Jesus taught. In such a relationship two people are giving love and support to each other and no one is being misused so how can it be a sin? Out of the many things on the tick list which Leviticus says are sinful the Church decided to selectively pick that one to incorporate into its teaching. I suggest that if you haven't, you should read Leviticus. Apart from a whole load of things it is sinful to eat, e.g. black pudding, bacon, shellfish, lobster, tuna, rabbit, duck, road-kill .... it is sinful for a man to cut the hair on his temples or to trim his beard other than in the prescribed way. A woman during her menstrual cycle is unclean and must not go to any holy place (church?) and she must atone for her unclean discharge by making a sacrifice of a defenceless dove. Men must be circumcised. You must not wear anything made of two different sorts of material - so poly-cotton is a definite no-no. On the other hand, surprisingly, some things are specifically allowed. It says it is OK for you to own a man as a slave. If he is a fellow countryman you have to give him his freedom after 6 years but even then you may get to keep his wife and children. I

bet the 17th century slave traders could quote Leviticus and Exodus. Exodus says its OK to beat a slave provided he or she survives the beating by more than 3 days.

Why then did the Church pick the reference to homosexual relations out of the morass of other things which Leviticus says are sinful? I link that question with others. Why did the Church declare Mary Magdalene a prostitute and belittled her role? Why did it decide priests should be celibate? Why were women not allowed to be clergy and why did the Church come up with the doctrine of "the perpetual virginity of Mary" which said Jesus' mother remained a virgin all of her life. The answer to all these questions is that at one period in its history, starting in the middle ages the church had a hang-up about sex and saw women (the Virgin Mary necessarily excepted) as not only inferior to men but easily manipulated by the devil into tempting men into sin - starting with Eve getting Adam into trouble. It is now the 21st century and these ideas linger as traditional values. It wasn't until 1969 that the Catholic church finally decided Mary Magdalene wasn't a prostitute. As I see it she was very much a part of the team. When the men went off and hid, Mary stood vigil by the cross and she was the first person to whom the risen Jesus appeared. The CofE - very reluctantly on the part of some of its traditionalists - gave women equality about a century after secular society did. The delay and procrastination did little for the Church's image. The Roman Catholic church still has celibate priests and we know the problems that has caused. I don't know if the perpetual virginity of Mary is still part of CofE's doctrine but it was at the beginning of the 19th century when John Wesley (founder of the Methodist movement) affirmed it, yet Jesus' brothers are named and his sisters mentioned in the Bible and surely it would be dishonest of Mary to marry Joseph if she intended to remain a virgin.

Jesus said - don't put new wine in old bottles - and I see his message as the new wine and the old testament - Leviticus et al - as the old bottle. He had nothing to say about sex or homosexuality. In the case of homosexuality the Church is half a century behind secular society regarding a matter which is basically about tolerance, compassion and justice and it is damaging the Church. Those who criticise and discriminate against homosexuals are misusing them, and misusing your fellow man is a sin - encouraged by the Church. I recall Jesus said "Judge not lest you be judged". I suspect that given time the CofE will change, just as it did regarding women clergy as the old guard die off, but in the mean time it is shooting itself in the foot, looking rather silly and congregations are falling. I can see no justification for the Church cherry picking bits out of Leviticus. Either you accept that Jesus brought a new message to replace the old or you believe that the old still stands - all of it - and Jesus merely enhanced it. If the latter then you have to abide by all which is written in the OT so any clergyman who has short hair, or is clean shaven, or isn't circumcised who criticises someone for being gay is a hypocrite, made so by the teaching of the church he serves.

We are never going to return to the era when it was the social norm to go to Church, and it just wasn't done to criticise the monarchy or question the teaching of the Church. Much of Church Doctrine was thought up by committees of men. It has survived because of the power of the church to suppress descent. The last person executed for heresy was less than 200 years ago and it is only since the 1960s that it has been socially acceptable to critically examine, and openly criticise the church. In the last few decades easy access to knowledge and the spread of ideas means that now the church stands naked in the spotlight of knowledge. No one is going to accept something just because "the church says so" nor should they. If you look at its history it has got a lot of things wrong. While what Jesus taught is not negotiable, to survive in the modern world the Church needs to respond to the new situation and look very critically at what it teaches. Is it consistent? Where did it come from? Can it be justified? Is it actually compatible with the teachings of Jesus?

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