

Bishop Richard Harries Sermon

Third Sunday before Lent

St Mary's Barnes 10am service on 5th February 2023

You may have noticed, a couple of months ago, the results of the latest census figures which reveal a declining number of professed Christians in our society. This was re-enforced last week by an analysis of those figures which show that amongst young people those who say that have 'no religion' now outnumber those who claim to be Christian. For example, 53% of 27-year-olds say they have no religion. There is nothing surprising about this. The trend has been obvious for some time, and the situation is likely to get worse. So, let's think about the implications of this both for the role of the church in our own time and our personal faith. There is no cause for panic but there is need for a sober assessment and a serious consideration for each one of us of what we believe and why we believe it. We might put it like this. Even in a period of apparent decline do we have confidence and what are the grounds of that confidence?

At the beginning of the 4th century, the emperor Constantine was dramatically converted to the Christian faith, which by the end of the century became the official religion of the Roman empire, East and West. Christianity became embedded in the power structures of the state, and we still live in the aftermath of that.

But it is what happened before the 4th century which is of real interest. For 250 years Christians were an illegal minority subject to spasmodic but fierce persecution. Yet by the time of the last great persecution under Diocletian in 300 they were probably a majority in the East and a significant minority in the West. Without an army, without power, for the most part without any significant worldly positions they had won over the heart and mind of the Roman World. Their understanding of God as one who loved humanity so much that he came to share our human nature, save us from ourselves and lead us into eternal life captured their imagination and changed their lives.

I believe that what took hold of those early Christians can still take hold of people today. There is no more sublime, beautiful and encouraging understanding of life than the Christian story that impelled them and which has shaped the whole of Western and much of near Eastern civilisation.

That having been said, we face real difficulties today in getting that story heard and taken seriously.

When Rowan Williams became Archbishop of Canterbury he said his ambition was to re-capture the imagination of our culture for the Christian faith. That task remains and the obstacles are formidable.

First there is a culture of disdain in the media. The number of times I have read a columnist beginning 'I was brought up as a Catholic...to go on to say in effect of course I don't believe in anything now.

The novelist Michael Arditti, has said that it is much easier in our society to come out as gay, as he is, than as a Christian, which he also is.

Sadly, there is some good reason for this rejection. The terrible sexual abuse in the churches for a start. It is an appalling record. Then some who claim exclusive title to the word Christian believe a number of things which strike most people as either patently untrue or immoral and this can give the very word Christian a bad name.

But in addition to our shortcomings as Christians there is the irrational closed mind-set of some disdainers who through a combination of ignorance linked to a flawed, simplistic view of science who refuse to take religious views seriously

So partly because of our fault, and partly because of the ignorance and limitations of our present cultural milieu there is a challenge. But this should not take away from the grounds of our hope for the future-The reality of God as he has made himself and his good purpose known to us in Christ.

So, the situation is that Christians will increasingly be a minority in a sceptical and disdainful society. I want to draw out two aspects of this in relation to contemporary culture.

First, the church is here, we Christians are here, above all for the truths sake, not for any benefits that there might be derived from religious practice. Our society is one which is dominated by the idea of self-development, of wellness, fitness and mental calm. There are hundreds of adverts every day which will claim to offer us these things. And there is nothing in principle wrong with wanting such goods of course. But the Christian faith is not there primarily to offer them. Some scientific studies claim that a religious faith makes us happier and healthier. This could be true, but it is besides the point. Religious faith should also leave us wracked over the state of the world. Christian faith is not an aspect of the wellness industry, it is a witness to the truth.

Secondly, the Christian faith exists for the whole world and everyone within it. At its heart is the idea that God has united himself to the whole of humanity, he has reconciled the whole world to himself, whether people are aware of it or not. So when we pray in this church Sunday by Sunday or in the Langton chapel morning by morning it is on behalf of the world, the world to which Christ has united to himself, which he lifts to the father. And through our prayer we share in the priesthood of Christ joining earth and heaven, God and humanity.

Jesus says in today's Gospel. 'You are the salt of the earth'. Salt was used in the ancient world for preserving food and for bringing out its savour. It is not concerned with its own identity but with preserving and bringing out the identity of what it is dissolved in.

Should not Christians welcome this state of affairs, in which it means something to call oneself a Christian, and is no longer just a matter of cultural identity? Unless there is a Divine Surprise ahead, Christians will be a minority for the foreseeable future. It will be a difficult, humbling, chastening experience but a healthy one. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in a letter from prison to someone being baptised. He said the traditional Christian words

have become so problematic and so remote that we hardly dare anymore to speak of them. ... So, our traditional language must perforce become powerless and remain silent and our Christianity today will be confined to praying for and doing right by our fellow men. ... But the day will come when men will be called again to utter the word of God with such power as will change and renew the world. ... Until then the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair, but there will be those who pray and do right and wait for God's own time.¹

Christians in a minority should certainly not regard themselves as morally superior to other humans-we are not- nor should we think they have been singled out for eternal salvation in a way others are not. The consecration prayer in the Book of Common Prayer service of Holy Communion proclaims that Christ's sacrifice was 'for the whole world'. When the church day by day prays the psalms with all their sense of human agony and longing for a world in which the innocent no longer suffer injustice, it does so with the whole of humanity in mind. Or rather, it does so 'in Christ' who keeps the whole world in the Divine Mind.

Despite our terrible flaws and failings we have been entrusted with the sublime beauty of God's truth. Whether the times are propitious or unpropitious our task is to bear witness, and we do so in Christ for humanity as a whole.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, **Letters and Papers from Prison**, SCM, 1962, p160