

Shopping for truth

We live in a deeply individualistic and liberal world. Each individual is free to make up their own mind, and certainly no one should ever impose their own views, opinions and beliefs on another. The culture has got a pretty clear message for us religious types - it's ok for you but don't you dare push it on anyone else.

I haven't got time this morning to describe precisely how we got to this point culturally but the basic outline of our journey is clear.

In the wake of the terrible religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, the great thinkers of the European Enlightenment questioned the necessity, indeed the relevance, of religion within society. Enlightenment thinkers insisted on rational proofs and rejected the ideas of divine revelation, miraculous events and any truth beyond human reason. Hume questioned the existence of God, Rousseau argued for a society based on rights rather than responsibilities, Kant proposed that ethics were derived from human reason, rather than divine sources - essentially the Enlightenment philosophers did a pretty good job demolishing the distinctive features of Christianity such as the uniqueness of Christ, the authority and inspiration of scripture, watering it down to a moral code and eliminating the spiritual and supernatural as explanations for anything.

That was the basis for modernism and its influences are still found in our culture's prevailing attitudes to faith. But a greater challenge was to come. In the 20thC postmodernism, the child of modernism, arrived on the cultural scene and really threw a spanner in the works by claiming that the much cherished reason of modernist thought was nowhere near as impartial and objective as the Hume, Rousseau, Kant and their mates would have us believe. Indeed reason was nothing more than the opinions of some white middle aged blokes who had foisted their opinions on everyone else. Their "reason" was no more objectively true than Christianity.

The result of course now is a general belief in nothing, or as G.K. Chesterton pointed out a belief in everything. There is apparently no overarching truth in which we can trust and the range of lifestyle choices and belief systems is dazzling. You can quite literally shop around for your own truth nowadays. You can curate a pick and mix belief system that suits your personal preferences and the passing fashions just as you like. Arrange your home based on the principles of feng shui, practise buddhist meditation, see a reiki practitioner for your bad back. Whatever you like. It's all up for grabs. Christianity takes its place among these as just another private lifestyle choice.

Private. There's an interesting word when we apply it to our faith. I think we have constructed prisons of privacy for ourselves. The deal with the devil is that we have convinced ourselves that we must keep our faith private, separate, even from our children and friends, so that most church members have agreed that religion and faith are best left in the intimate, private spaces of our lives.

And that's not surprising, the societal pressure to keep quiet about faith, to keep it private, is enormous.

(We have made what is most private and intimate quite public. Do I dare to make the comment that it is considered quite ok to talk about sexuality in our schools but not about faith?)

And yet “how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’

How can we bring the good news under such conditions, when it is a great social failure to believe that there is such a thing as truth and that you are in possession of it, and another great failure to believe in something for which there is no proof. What is the role of evangelism then? What is the church meant to be in days like ours?

Paul’s letter to the Romans is clear. We are to be more than a religious version of Rotary, more than a harmless collection of coffee mornings, more than a peaceful escape from a busy week come Sunday morning.

How? How?

We have no option but to live in the world. Jacques Ellul, a Christian commentator of the 20thC made this rather obvious point, warning us on the one hand, against trying to retreat in a kind of religious isolation, and on the other hand, against trying to create a Christian society. Living between the two requires a certain way of being in the world.

Firstly we must be real about the world we live in. Everything is not fine. Of course there is love, beauty, mercy, justice and we must point them out when we can but the reality that pervades the world is that it is still broken. Sin and evil must be faced and identified.

Secondly, we must refuse to accept that the way things are is the way things will always be. Greed, cruelty, the lust for power, loveless self indulgence may dominate the general drift of society, but it need not always be like this. They are not the inevitable facts of life and they do not have the last word. We hold onto that hope of a better way.

The Christian’s role is to be a sign of a different kingdom. We are not meant to just try to do some good, to be nice and help the world be a little better. In fact one of my friends once pointed out to me that they had left the church of their childhood because they can do all that without being a Christian....of course they can.

If my friend had experienced life in the church as a signpost to another way of life, another regime, another kingdom, which can be glimpsed in this world but which has not yet fully arrived, would that have made a difference?

What do you know or remember from books or perhaps films about the legend of Robin Hood?

- He stole from the rich to give to the poor
- Maid Marian
- His band of Merry Men
- Rebellion against the Sheriff of Nottingham

Nobody knows if there's much, or any, historical realism in the tale but if you will bear with me, I think the historical context in which it is set might be useful to us this morning.

In 12thC England wicked Prince John usurped his brother Richard's throne while he was away fighting the crusades. John imposed a brutal taxation regime on the peasants and was practically starving them to death by restricting their right to hunt.

Robin Hood is the leader of a resistance movement of sorts. He and his followers refused to accept the rule of "King John," and while they made a nuisance of themselves in small acts of rebellion, most importantly they kept alive the hope of the true king's return.

When news arrived in England, that King Richard was returning, Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men began to whisper this good news around to a peasantry who had largely given up hope. All is not lost, their king had not forgotten them, things were going to be different.

This cheerful band of resistance fighters, this band of Merry Men, spreading hope and the Good News of their King's return, is perhaps not a bad image for the church in the world today. They live under an oppressive regime but they can smile and laugh because they know that the way things are is not the last word. The true king is coming and things will one day be different.

Our king too has established a beachhead in enemy territory. Jesus has come. He has inaugurated his kingdom, and let's not be shy about this, it is a kingdom of joy and celebration.

Think about the delight filled images Jesus used to describe the kingdom. A feast with lavish food, a woman who finds a priceless lost treasure and throws a party. This is no stern king nor a cold humourless rule. This is a gracious host, inviting us into his home where there is food and wine and laughter and joy.

A church that is miserable, dark and dull has rather missed the point I fear. To what kind of a kingdom does that point? Remember, we are to be like the Merry Men, joyful because our joy rests on truth so much stronger than anything else on offer in the marketplace of the world. A "good time" is so often thin and brittle, only briefly hiding the final realities of sin and death before it cracks. Joy that is built on the coming of the true king is full of goodness, warmth and welcome.

And the good news that Paul urges us to proclaim is not a philosophical truth to be debated but an actual state of affairs. Good news, not good ideas. Not abstract concepts but a reality that can be glimpsed and experienced - life under the rule of the true king.