

Revd. Simon Lewis

Sunday 1 August

Theme: Trinity 9

Isolation Radio Talk

Faith is congruous with reason

You make your spiritual journey in the world as it is and not in the world you would like it to be. Your understanding in many areas of life is different from say 30 years ago.

Good Morning

In my subject, theology and faith, the roots of the present reach back into the 18th century; it is called the 'Age of enlightenment'. Along with science came industrialisation, movement from country to city. The face of the city changed, so also the inner world of women and men. Old ways of working and living; thinking and relating; old ways of being community, of being church, were transformed.

Change accelerated in two World Wars and increasing speed of communication. If this was progress for humankind, there were unresolved tensions; then as now people dreamt of a return to a golden age; it never existed. If you remember science from schooldays, you will recall that, when the 'Stable State' is lost, it is replaced with a degree of high uncertainty. When a liquid turns into gas there is danger of explosion.

Contrary to the teaching of the Christian Scripture the church seemed to adopt a way of living I liken to the pebble thrown into a pond. The effect is felt most strongly close to the place where the pebble hits the water; as the disturbance moves further from the centre, it grows less and less until untroubled calm returns to the surface.

You might feel the call to untroubled calm when you hear pleas to return to the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments. I become weary at protesting that nothing is gained by shouting at people who will not or cannot hear what is said, but then, you have heard me say before, a common diagnosis in Holy Scripture is deafness. 'Let anyone with ears listen!' (Matthew 11.15). I think Jesus spoke with a note of asperity - you know that tone, of harshness, sharpness, abrasiveness.

The pebble in the pond will not do; our Lord is at the centre; close to him are those who love him best; then those who love not quite so much; and so on, until the waters of faith are calm, untroubled and, yes, still. Difficult, more confusing, even dangerous, but more real now, is the image of an amoeba; mysterious, breaking, reforming, breaking again, reconnected, linked, growing, shrinking; the picture of an amoeba is useful for that secret pathway of faith.

Experience of life tells you that a direction and a purpose is desirable. Progress is not guaranteed and to say 'everything will turn out right in the end' does not follow. Our world is ill at ease with itself. As the world grows older; as knowledge expands, as finite resources grow less, as the reality of a changing climate and further pandemics feeds your fears, the choices each of us make have wider and wider implications.

It is said, a butterfly moving its wings in South America can cause a hurricane in China. I cannot vouch for that, but I can appreciate the image; it stirs the imagination. In the end you may agree with French Priest and Philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin that ahead of us is the ultimate choice between 'adoration and

annihilation.' It is the psychiatrist Mr Dysart, in Peter Shaeffer's play *Equus*, who says, 'Without worship you shrink, it's as brutal as that...'. Or to put it another way, you worship, or you die, it's as simple as that.

Before I build more castles in the air in which you can live, I place your feet more firmly on the road. You need to see the road you will travel in relation to the world around you. Just setting out will not really bring you to your journey's end; you need to have a firm idea where you want that end to be. The direction in which you go, the turnings you make are not necessarily of your own choosing. All of you are children of your parents and influenced by your families, your communities. All of you are conditioned by the age in which you find yourself. You are responsible; you do have choices; in the bible you read 'I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live...' (Deuteronomy 30.15-16).

I speak to you out of the conviction that Christ Jesus is the Lord of life. I do not accept that what happens to us, be it good or ill, is 'sent by God'. 'Such and such is sent to try us', does not seem to me to be good theology, nor the action of a gracious, loving God. At the same time all that happens is the opportunity for that graciousness of God - God's love - to break into your consciousness. That is true at a birth, a marriage, an illness, a bereavement and ultimately at your own death.

Such is the way of faith. Hear the saintly Archbishop Michael Ramsey:- (Canterbury 1961-74)

Faith is an act of the whole person.

It is a commitment of the self to a way of understanding experience,

and a commitment of the self to a way of life.

And while this belief in God is not a discovery of our reason,

and is not something which our reason can prove,

it claims to be congruous with reason;

congruous with my reason inasmuch as, without it,

the sense I see in the world becomes nonsense;

congruous with reason inasmuch as it gives a view of the world

which makes rational sense of the world's most significant aspects.

We have a phrase common enough in the Church called 'Spiritual Direction'. There are some, gifted to be special signposts for others, pointing the way ahead. It is also the care of each person from time-to-time to be beside people on their journey, especially at a fork in the road, a turning in the highway. What I think I can promise any of you who continue to be refreshed in your faith, careful in your worship; any of you, who take seriously your moral responsibilities, who struggle with prayer and the Christian life, is that your ministry will be sought out by other travellers; by the lonely, the marginalised, the poor, the oppressed.

The promise of that is given by our Lord when he said 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matthew 6.33). The writer of Psalm 23 goes further in saying 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long (Psalm 23.6).

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let us pray

Lord God,
you are our shepherd, we shall not want.
You makes us lie down in green pastures;
you lead us beside still waters;
you restore our souls.
You lead us in right paths
for your name's sake.

Even though we walk through the darkest valley,
we need fear no evil;
for you are with us;
your rod and your staff -
they comfort us.

You prepare a table before us
in the presence of our enemies;
you anoint our heads with oil;
our cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us
all the days of our lives,
and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord
our whole life long.
Amen.