

Revd. Simon Lewis

Sunday 15 August

Theme: Trinity II

Isolation Radio Talk

Not a lamppost; not a handrail.

Good Morning

I have tried to say over these past few weeks that 'crossroads', 'signposts', 'collisions', as the Christian novelist and theologian G.K. Chesterton called them, happen to you on life's journey; thought about with sensitivity and spiritual awareness they become encounters with God.

Whether a birth, a death, falling in love, a marriage, a change of work, a move of house, these are the encounters; they invite you to think about purpose and meaning in life; if that thinking makes any reference to God, Creator and Sustainer of all things, so well and good; the evidence is strong, that transformation is of the essence, in an encounter with God; by that I mean, it is the breaking through to a fuller life.

In evolution, as you understand it, you follow something of the same story; life, as it moves from a lower to a high form, passes through the threshold of transformation. You speak of a greater freedom, more choice, as a way of describing it. As each collision happens transformation is irreversible; a Christian says for instance, that the death of the old gives birth to the new. This is the powerful Christian Scripture theme; life comes through death. St Paul can confidently say in the light of his own understanding, that as he believed, the end of time was close. 'Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed', he wrote in his first letter to the Christian church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 15.51).

That was the faith of the early fathers and 'faith' says St Anselm, 'seeks understanding.' Gerard Hughes, a Scottish Jesuit Priest reflected on this in his Book 'God of Surprises.'

A mark of true Christianity will be its intellectual vigour and its search for meaning in every aspect of life. True Christianity will always be critical, questioning and continually developing in its understanding of God and of human life.

In a prayer we use in church Christians define the place of the Scriptures for the pilgrim as a 'light to your path'. The Scriptures are not lampposts to prop up moral instability; they are not handrails to help the unsteady. What they do, is tell the story of God's relationship with God's creation; they tell of the possibilities that are open to those who know God.

What is this, 'knowing God'?

Here's one or two thoughts. I begin with our western world that presently gives high priority to the worship of money, celebrity, or 'things'; these are idols. Unlike some controversies of the past, idolatry is not the contemplation of picture or sculpture or icon; these can be great aids to devotion and self-knowledge, particularly in an age that relies on picture and image to communicate. What seems more important is what you worship within yourself, 'in your heart', to use a good biblical metaphor. A Christian says there can be nothing more important, nothing to

compete, with the glory and the mystery of the presence of God. The long profound history of your faith, stretching back to the desert, in the deepest place of your soul, God, and God alone must be, is, there; God alone is to be worshipped.

The Church has responded to changing times throughout history; you do not know what future patterns may emerge; but the body of Christ, when it is true to our Lord, has been charged and empowered for God's mission of love and justice and peace to the world. It has failed so many times, of course it has; it must repent, not out of guilt for things past but so that, as the old prayer says, 'you may have time for amendment of life through the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit' (*Evening Prayer*, in *The Book of Common Prayer*). The Church then, continues to do that even if its harmony and its ministry are imperfect and impaired; when it is faithful and true to its Lord, the people of God will stand for the glory and the good of the kingdom and will be known by its love.

Cardinal John Henry Newman said that "to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." Transformation has been the essence of the recent past but that too is set in the greater currents and swells of a restless and disturbed world. At such a time it seems important to take a brief excursion off your own pilgrim path.

I want to bring into your consciousness the relationship with, and a contemporary response of Christianity, to other faiths; it should be high on our agenda; the issue has shot to prominence in the political, social, cultural, and religious arena in this 21st century.

There are beliefs systems that I distrust; I believe them to be undesirable. You might call them 'Christian cults'; groups who do not understand and accept the Bible as stated by Nicene Christianity; among them I include The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unity Church. I find the philosophy and the theology claimed inadequate to support their theories or practices, and I am hugely suspicious of the ability and willingness of such cults to manipulate and be abusive. I acknowledge of course this is a charge levelled also against the Christian Church and we have heard more recently the same charge levelled against Islam and even Buddhism.

My view is quite otherwise when I examine the great world religions. Most it seems are living trees with different branches. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism. The differences do not fascinate me nearly so much as the similarities. Commonly they reject materialism and the idolatry that is the worship of money. Speaking in different tongues, they recognise as supreme the moral law in human affairs and the relations of that law both to religious experience as well as to a reality, the ground of your being, whom you call God. What I go on to say is that you should always compare the best with the best and not what you may so often be tempted to do, the best with the worst. Your best prayer may be Our Lord's; 'lead us not into that temptation', or to put it another way, 'save us from that temptation'.

Likewise, there cannot be a Christian who cannot pray this prayer from the Hindu tradition:
From delusion lead me to Truth.
From darkness lead me to Light.
From death lead me to immortality.
To which I add, Amen.

Thank you for listening.