

Can we believe in the Church?
A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry
in Trinity College, Cambridge
on 7th November 2010

(Deuteronomy 10.12-22; Ephesians 3.1-13)

Introduction

‘Can we believe in the Church?’

In Christian terms, the answer to the question of the Church lies in the answer to the question of God. Once we have said ‘yes, we can believe in God’, then at the same time we have said, ‘yes, we can believe in the Church’. For God is the creating God and the electing God.

The God of justice, love and hospitality who creates society

Ancient Israel – our Old Testament reading tells us - knew the God of gods and the Lord of lords, as the one who executes justice for the orphan and widow, and one who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10.18). This God of justice and love and hospitality who creates a world, creates society to inhabit it and to reflect his life of justice and love and hospitality.

Furthermore, the God of Israel has a strategy for effecting the sort of society, the sort of common life, that God wills for his creation.

And that strategy is the election of a particular people – a small and rather insignificant people – to be a sign of the society that God has designed: a way of living together that embodies the ways of God’s justice and love and hospitality. This is a people – a community, a church – that God has ‘set his heart in love upon’ (Deuteronomy 10.15).

This is not because there is anything intrinsically better or more lovable about them than any other people. God has set his heart in love upon *this* people, he has chosen *this* community, because God wants to shape its common life to be not only a *sign* of God’s life but a *means* by which this life of justice, love and hospitality is extended to all the people’s of the earth.

Jesus as the true society of justice, love and hospitality

According to the Christian story, the community that is chosen and called to be a sign and a means of the embodiment of God’s life in human society, comes to an intensive concentration in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In him, and in his dealings with others, the sort of society that God intends for the world takes shape – not in a way discontinuous with what has gone before; but in a way that fulfills it.

The dealings of Jesus are just – just like God: truth is spoken, wrong doing acknowledged and merciful fairness applied.

Jesus' dealings are loving – steadfastly loving like God: the lepers are touched, the grieving are consoled, the sick are healed.

Jesus' dealings are hospitable – radically hospitable like God: the poor, the forgotten, the ostracized, the marginalized, the sinners, those on the outside are reached and welcomed.

Jesus' reach to those on the edge of and beyond the covenant community, and his gathering of a new sort of society around him, is the link to St Paul's great vision of the Church in our New Testament reading. Paul talks about the mystery of the good news of God, hidden for so long but now revealed. It is the good news that the riches of God's grace in Christ are boundless (Ephesians 3.8). This unfettered, extensive, welcoming, hospitable, boundless love of God extends to the Gentiles. They too are to be included in the community that is called to be a sign God's life of justice, love and hospitality and a means of shaping a society in the image of God.

Through the Church says St Paul; *through* this community where there is now neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3.28) 'the wisdom of God in its rich variety' (Ephesians 3.10) is to be made known.

The Church today as a sign and means of justice, love and hospitality

Well how interesting, and how quaint. How interesting to examine ancient texts and get a glimpse of the self understanding of a small sect of a small nation twenty centuries ago. And how quaint of them to think themselves of such significance.

What of today? Have not two millennia given the lie to Paul's extravagant idealism?

Well, yes, of course, history has built up a bank of examples of injustice, lack of love and a rejection of others practised within the Church and even perpetrated on society by the Church.

And yet, there is another body of evidence weighing heavily on the other side of the scales.

Yesterday I was with my Diocesan Synod: a large group of people, men and women, from pockets of deep poverty in recession hit Coventry city to wealthy Warwickshire villages. Some highly educated and some not. Our agenda was society; not the society of our Church but the society of our city and county and how as Christ's people in these times – times of recession, redundancies and massive reduction in public spending – we are called *to prophesy* for the principles of God's good society, *to protect* the vulnerable, speaking and acting

with them and for them for a just society, and to be ready *to partner* – where appropriate – a state that is saying to us, we need your help, we believe in you.

Last week, I heard of three Church projects. One a drop in café for teenage mums in Coventry – we have a very high teenage pregnancy rate. A safe place for them to gather and build friendships free from the gaze of those they fear are observing them and threatening to remove their children from them. A second provides a highly professional mentoring programme for addicts of drink and drugs, many of them ex-offenders and a church where they are made to feel at home. A third is the beginnings of a new church community for hundreds of disaffected young people who gather in the precinct of Coventry's Cathedral and who have found in that ancient and modern set of buildings a welcome that makes them want to stay.

Small examples, of course, in the scale of things, but a sign of a society of justice, and love and hospitality nonetheless – a sign worth believing in.

Next weekend, Coventry will be commemorating the 70th anniversary of that dreadful night in November when most of its buildings were obliterated, its cathedral burnt to the ground and hundreds of its inhabitants killed by a systematic bombing of the city for hours on end. As we remember the horrors of war we will also remember the words of a voice from the ruins of the Cathedral, broadcast to the nation, saying that the only way out of the endless cycle of violence and retaliatory counter-violence is to reach out to one's enemies and with them to build 'a kinder, more Christ-like world'. They are words that Coventry at least thought worthy of believing in: a city that now calls itself 'City of peace and reconciliation'.

But what about the Church's failure to live at peace within itself and to heal its deep divisions? What happened to Paul's great vision of the Church being a sign of the reconciliation and unity of all humankind for which God longs?

Well, yes again, there is plenty of which to accuse the Church. We are a fragmented family. But we are still a family – a remarkable, international family of billions of people. Last week I prayed with a Nigerian Anglican bishop, a bishop of a persecuted people; I was contacted by a Roman Catholic brother of the Taizé community in France, a community of Christians from all the churches – a brother whom I last saw at the Papal mass in Birmingham. And last week I was exchanging emails with a Pentecostal friend who founded a charity that is transforming slums of unimaginable poverty in New Delhi. There is a deep connection and affection between Christians that somehow overrides the differences in place and culture, in race and gender. That is worth believing in and being part of.

But we remain helpless

But it is not the Church's claims to any sort of greatness that makes it worth believing in, rather its recognition of its weakness. It is not to any sort of pretence of power that makes the Church worthy of trust or affection but rather its profession of penitence. The theologian Karl Barth, who had seen much of the Church of his land give way to the invidious influence of evil in Nazi Germany, posed the question 'Who are we, and what is [the] Church'. He answered, 'We had best attempt to give no other answer than this, that the Church is the congregation of those, who know they are helpless, but that they are helpless in the presence of the One who as their Saviour and Lord is greater than they'. That is why the Church is worth believing in – because the Church believes in the 'boundless riches of Christ' – a love and grace, an acceptance and a welcome that extends even to me, and to you and to the ends of the earth. For God 'has set his heart in love' upon each of us.