

Celebration LINK

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Main article

The more imbued we are in the modern outlook on life, the less relevant purely religious truth becomes. If we want the cross to speak to the modern age, we need to pay more attention to the historical Jesus and how he understood the gospel.

CCCT gets new web site

CCCT now has a new web site!

The site tells the story of how the Trust came into being, with a brief history of the communities that were associated with it. The Home page describes how the Trust originally supported the ministry of Graham and Betty Pulkingham, on their arrival in Britain, with others from the Church of the Redeemer. A history page then links to seven further pages with photographs, describing the communities that have been linked with CCCT to one degree or another over the years.



Two more pages with links provide material on the principles of the life of the Community of Celebration. 'Living by Rule' gives you access to five sample chapters from a commentary on the Community's Rule of Life. An 'Articles' page accesses the lead articles from the last four issues of News from Celebration. Taken together, we hope this will provide some solid material about the nature of Christian community.

A 'Try community?' page has a link to the Community's own web site, where details can be found about how individuals and families can visit or stay in the Community, plus information about Community products for sale. A 'Contact' page enables visitors to the site get in touch with us. We hope they will increasingly do so as the site becomes known.

The site address (www.ccct.co.uk) is probably best viewed in a recent version of Internet Explorer. Older versions may take a long time to download, while more up to date versions of other browsers may alter some features such as the typeface. Happy viewing!

Celebration recognised by ECUSA

We have learned that the Community of Celebration has now been recognised by the American House of Bishops.

The Community's Visitor, Bishop Bill Folwell, recently reported that, subject to a couple of minor provisos, the ECUSA Committee on religious orders had agreed to recognise Celebration as a religious community within its jurisdiction. Bishop

Bill added that he had received a number of very complimentary comments about the Community.

This development marks the conclusion of a long process, starting originally over 20 years ago. Interestingly, when the original constitution was submitted, the Community were advised to live with it for 20 years! This step is a great encouragement.

Religious truth and the modern world view

How do they connect?

This is the time of year when we are focused on the climax of Jesus' life on earth. Yet I cannot help but reflect on the fact that, while we in church take the dogmas of our faith almost for granted, without debating them, for those outside, going to church is about as alien as it is for me to go to a mosque. It simply has no relevance to their lives.

This dichotomy has always troubled me. Maybe it's not a bad thing for the boundaries of belief and unbelief to be sharply drawn – at least you know where you are. But the fact is that Christians and unbelievers all live in the same world, and are imbued with the same 21st century world view. Surely there should be some dialogue between them?

My impression of early Christianity is that such an engagement with the prevailing world view may well have been one of the factors leading to its widespread acceptance. Yet in our time religious belief often seems to exist in a kind of cocoon. In relation to the world, we seem to either follow society, in matters of morals and justice, or else condemn it, from within the security of our own religious formulae.

In part, at least, I think this is related to our overwhelming focus on Jesus' death and its religious significance, i.e. atonement for sin. It's as if everything else he said and did were mere preliminaries in preparation for that. But although Jesus was a real man who was crucified, the idea of atonement belongs to the realms of mystery and religious insight: it is not historic fact which can be verified. To commend itself to modern people, it must engage with our modern world view just as Jesus did in his own day – and not simply impose something on it.

Herein lies the difficulty. The essence of the modern scientific outlook is that it progressively reduces the area of mystery. It's not that we reject mystery, but

anyone who clings to it in the hope of providing a place for God is seen as irrational. We have only to think of the recent TV series, *Son of God*, to realise how far down this road we have all gone. Whether history proves or disproves what the Bible says is not the point; it's the fact that it takes the mystery out of things that undermines religious belief. If we could meet the real Jesus, would we with all our modern understanding come to the same conclusion as his disciples, that he was the Son of God and his death was an atonement for our sins? It's hard to imagine us deciding that about a modern human, however good.

So does that mean we are forced to live in a cocoon of religious truth, claiming historical fact yet immune to the glare of reality as we know it today? If so, it's no wonder that the church is so much on the defensive. If we are to engage with the world as we know it, we must get a grip on the historical Jesus and understand the cross in the light of what he said and did. Otherwise, we float off into a world of unreality where we have religious experience but don't connect with life.

Take, for instance, the core proposition of the church's gospel, that Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins. It isn't obvious, to the modern mind, how a Roman execution can save anybody from anything. So there is an array of additional propositions to back it up: that God has judged the world as sinful; that he requires the sacrifice of a life to atone for it; that only the life of his own son will suffice; that Jesus is that son.

Provided one accepts the propositions, all this makes for a consistent scheme. But what strikes one immediately is that none of it can be uncovered by a TV programme, not even in principle. Its truth derives from reflection about Jesus' death in the light of hundreds of years of Jewish religious tradition. If our primary focus is on his death, it will, in-

evitably, be concentrated on that theological interpretation.

Once that happens, our entire understanding of the Bible is coloured by our theological ideas. Texts become loaded with meaning, and so on. Jesus is worshipped and adored, but often simply as 'Saviour' or as a synonym for God, without much other content. No-one disputes that those who do this have a genuine spiritual life and experience. But to those who live in the modern world, it's as if the world view that we all live by has to be left at the door when we enter church.

What does belong in the real world, and what is recoverable, at least in principle, is what Jesus said. But here we come up against an interesting fact. Jesus never said to anyone that if you want to be accepted by God you need to trust in my death on the cross. The reason is not that he hadn't yet died! First, the very idea of conditional salvation is not one that we find him promoting. Second, the idea of sacrificial atonement is not a *fact* in the modern sense but a *paradigm* of salvation – and Jesus himself used a different one.

Let's explore that a bit more. Human beings feel the need of salvation, at many different levels, and God is its ultimate source. But in what exactly does God's salvation consist? For that we need a paradigm, an interpretive tool or key to unlock the essence of it. The one which the church chose to focus on was the notion of Jesus death on the cross as a sacrificial atonement for sins. But it wasn't the one that Jesus himself used. For him, it was typically the image of the wedding banquet.

Are these two paradigms in conflict? They could be, depending on how we make use of them. Christians often give the impression that salvation is conditional on acceptance of a specific religious package. Jesus' gospel seems to

have been, 'You *are* accepted by God. Believe it'. The consequences of the church's scheme can mean something like entry into a religious club. The implications of Jesus' gospel are colossal: loving enemies, selling possessions, forgetting about safety, security or the affirmation of status, willingness to take up a cross.

At this point it might be as well to make clear what I am not saying in this argument. I am not suggesting that faith in Jesus' death on the cross is misplaced. I am suggesting that we might need to explore this paradigm of salvation more deeply, both in the light of what Jesus said and in view of modern understanding of how human beings work. The idea of sacrifice as a key to salvation is in fact an extremely powerful one.

Sacrifice is as old as homo sapiens as a means of dealing with tensions and conflicts in society caused by our competing desires and drives. All our badness is located in the scapegoat, who thus becomes its cause, and whose death or expulsion is required by 'god' or whatever substitutes for it, e.g. 'what's right'. We do exactly the same today when we demonise individuals or groups. But the irony is that when God appeared on earth in the shape of Jesus, we did exactly the same to him – even though, in his case, there could be no question of his innocence. The cross thus demonstrates that that entire way of dealing with our conflicts is inappropriate, and as far as God is concerned, in Jesus there is an end to it. Salvation is an end to that way of relating.

This brings the cross much nearer, both to what Jesus said and to our modern thinking. In fact, on this understanding, the idea of God as a heavenly ruler demanding a sacrifice for sin appears to belong to the very mindset from which Jesus' death should deliver us. How then does the cross tie in with Jesus' life and teaching?

Jesus' gospel, though simple, had implications which most people feel are impossible. But that's because our picture of Jesus as the Son of God makes us think that everything he said was a law, which we ignore at our peril. In fact, Jesus never laid down the law. When he talks, he talks from his spirit, not from a divine rule book. 'Love your enemies' does not mean 'Thou shalt love thy en-

emy', but something more like 'Try loving your enemies instead of hating them'.

And so it goes on, throughout the Gospels. Why be anxious – what good's that going to do? Oh, sell your possessions and give them to the poor. Watch out for those religious types – they'll make you jump through all sorts of hoops and make you feel bad. Mind you, you'll have to take up your cross if you follow me. People won't be happy if you take this kind of thing on board. That was how he talked. When he spoke of repentance, he wasn't talking about breast beating. For him, it meant learning to call God 'Abba' again – a childlike trust which doesn't expect God to make things better, but which knows that all is well no matter what, because we are in him and he in us.

All this flowed from his gospel that God loves you and accepts you unconditionally, no matter who you are. But there's more. When people really get hold of this truth, the response is an extravagant joy. The householder throws a feast for the Prodigal Son. Zacchaeus gives half his goods to the poor. Mary tips perfume worth a year's wages all over Jesus. And most significantly of all, Jesus himself makes an extravagant response to God by freely offering himself to the cross. Heb. 12 says he did it 'for the joy that was set before him'.

So Jesus talked about the heart of God and invited us to respond in kind, discovering that in him all is well, and therefore we do not need to surround ourselves with money, status, security, pleasure or whatever, in order to make things seem well. We are free – free to respond with the same boundless generosity that God himself has, thus breaking the cycle which causes us to think we can deal with our troubles by putting the blame for them on some scapegoat. Jesus' contribution was to allow himself to become a scapegoat, thus exposing the irrational, unjust and ultimately futile nature of that way of dealing with things – which to us seems natural and normal.

Given that God was in Christ, the importance of this is enormous. It is not so much that God punishes Jesus for sins which we committed, a scenario which takes place out of the reach of human comprehension, but rather that God in Jesus joins us in the whole sorry

human mess. He bore our sins – literally: he joined the countless others we have treated this way, and experienced for himself what we do to those who threaten our security. He gave up trying to change us and became one with us. This is the essence of salvation.

The sacrifice of innocent victims is rational only if there is a god or an absolute principle which requires it. In Jesus God showed that is not the case, because in the name of God, God himself was made an innocent victim. Far from being a punishment of Jesus by God, the cross became the means by which he identified with us and revealed the futility of our attempts to purge ourselves of the consequences of our natural human behaviour.

On this view, the two paradigms of salvation – Jesus' paradigm of the wedding banquet and the church's paradigm of God himself as the sacrificial victim – are complementary. The image of the banquet reflects Jesus' gospel that acceptance by God is unconditional; it makes little sense if salvation is subject to certain religious requirements. Likewise the cross reflects God's boundless generosity in taking the part of the innocent victim, to show us how wrong we are, not only in our conception of who he is and what he requires, but also in thinking that we can gain salvation that way.

The response to both paradigms is not one of duty or moral obligation but one of joy. We are invited to join God, Jesus, Zacchaeus, Mary of Bethany and all the rest in making our own extravagant expressions of joy. It's a response from the heart, and there are no rules for that, not even religious ones. Joy comes from the realisation that all is well; that we are accepted in the beloved. It's a realisation which, like the lancing of a boil, releases the pressure within us to protect ourselves and bolster our egos with every device imaginable – the consequence being an end of scapegoating, demonising and the marginalisation of the weak in society.

Here, it seems to me, is one of the possibilities for dialogue with the people of our age. If we focus on what Jesus said, we keep our feet on the ground because his words belong to the world we know.

In the process, what he did (on the cross) is put into its proper context, where it can speak to people who don't believe in gods who demand sacrifice, but can appreciate the role of sacrifice and scapegoats in human behaviour.

Perhaps all this sounds like an intellectual exercise. But Jesus invited us to have

a heart, and it was precisely that which so threatened the vested interests of his own day, both religious and secular, because it wouldn't abide by the rules which protected them. And the point is, there isn't a single one of us who doesn't have a vested interest at one level or another. So the question secular society wants to see answered, implicitly at

any rate, is not whether Jesus saves but whether we have the heart that he had. If we do, in a real sense the question of whether Jesus saves will answer itself. It will probably be for them to answer it, rather than us.

Phil Bradshaw SCC

Cybertalk

Whatever one feels about modern technology, there's no doubt it helps to make sense of being on two sides of the Atlantic. In fact, that's where it comes into its own. While text messaging may be the rage amongst the young with mobile phones in Britain, email by computer has become for us the standard means of inter-continental chat.

Trawling through weeks of messages, one gets the feel of life in Aliquippa. The big event recently was the shooting of a policeman at a housing scheme just up from Franklin Avenue where the Community live. The cop was ambushed, shot in the head and died instantly. It seems there had been a rumour of something big about to happen, and the shooting of a cop was part of it.

Christopher McKeown, who works for the Aliquippa fire service, was one of the first on the scene and was involved in actually moving the body.

His father Steven, a police chaplain, spent a couple of late nights at the police station and was part of planning the funeral. John Stanley, the recently arrived Church Army officer from Australia (see News from Celebration) was involved with efforts to help local residents deal with a police backlash, expressed by threatening gestures and racial slurs.

John Stanley certainly seems to have brought a spot of local colour to the street. Right across from the Community is a seedy looking bar, which to a foreign eye looks more like a dingy club from a back street in Soho. John and Bill Farra spent three hours there one night. John was keen to see if the owner would give permission for him or the Community to do some singing or entertaining there. Watch this space...

Mostly, however, emails reveal the footprints of community life. We're still having a few problems with our new

computer system. We've booked an outside speaker for the annual conference. Four of us are going next weekend to a Roman Catholic conference on peace and justice issues. Maybe Bill and James will build an earth oven in the back garden this summer. When are you next coming over? What should the agenda be when we visit you? We need to spend some time discussing writing projects, web sites, networking. With visitors from UK and Sweden, we're going to be full during the Easter period.

In amongst all this is an ongoing dialogue. An exchange of correspondence with Betty Pulkingham... what do you think of *Honest to God* and all that stuff that was going around in the 60s? How does it relate to what was happening at Redeemer? How do we talk about what God has done amongst us? What is God saying today? Life in cyberspace does have major limitations, but at least it keeps us connected.

Community to have its own chapel

After months and years of deliberation, the Community is pressing ahead with plans to build its own chapel. Initial sketches were provided by Terry Schlink, a Companion of Celebration. Local architects have been commissioned, and it is hoped the new building will be completed later this year.

To have one's own chapel is always a dream for a Christian community, the most important space of all. Worship in a local church or a converted office is not at all the same. A dedicated place of worship gives identity to a group of people and expresses who they are. We all look forward to seeing it come into being.

Other news

Phil and Margaret Bradshaw became first time grandparents in March, when their daughter Rebecca gave birth to a baby boy, 7lb 8oz. Mum, baby Jake, and husband Rick, are all doing well.

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