

Celebration LINK

November 2008

Faith in Perspective

I'm sure I'm not alone in wondering sometimes what would have happened to Jesus if he had carried on living into old age. Of course in religious terms it's not a real question: the whole purpose of Jesus was that his life was to be sacrificed. But in principle it was possible, so the question that comes to mind is how would he have dealt with it when life's work seems done, when there isn't any energy for new challenges, when the old certainties no longer seem as assured as they were?

In theory you would think that faith should increase with age, but for many people it often seems to work the other way. What we consider to be faith is linked to the energy of the human spirit, which in younger people is at its best when it is focused and single minded. This is true in any field of human endeavour. Age and experience mellow, so that apparent certainties are seen for what they are and faith appears weaker because it is no longer intimately connected to a focused driving force.

Some might say that is no bad thing. Older people often feel weary with endless meetings and activities that seem terribly important at the time but which, in the larger scheme of things, do not matter a fig. Their outlook puts everything into perspective. At a younger age we are trying to build something or at least preoccupied with keeping the show on the road. Later we realise that there is nothing new under the sun and all our activities have a relative importance at best.

But of course we bring the same perspective to our religious beliefs. Dogmas are found to be much less rigid than we thought. Beliefs are more nuanced, allowing room for various viewpoints we had not previously considered or even been aware of. Differences between the ideas that have formed and shaped us and those that have shaped others seem rather less sharp and distinctive.

When this happens, faith can seem a rather insubstantial commodity. We are not excited by the kind of things that inspired us in our youth, but on the other hand there is nothing to replace them. The broader belief becomes, the harder it is to be definitive about what it is that we have faith in.

At this point I think it is important not to give up or merely go with the flow, coasting down the years towards the grave. The perspective of age is one of the ingredients of faith, enabling us to look critically at the spiritual and religious scene of our day, not in the usual complaining spirit that things are not what they used to be, but bringing our accumulated wisdom to bear on the situation we all face.

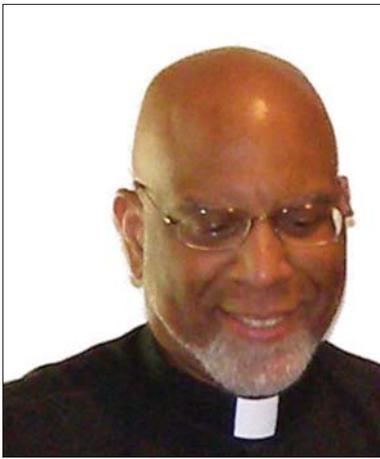
I was reminded of this recently when attending a course about Islam. Many of the beliefs and practices of Islam parallel those of Christianity; they are understandable to Christians even if they are rooted in the Koran rather than Christ. This is probably part of the reason for ancient Islam's success: Arian churches (denying or modifying the divinity of Christ) could assimilate to

it fairly easily. Today, Christians who are ambivalent about Jesus' resurrection or divinity can be attracted to it for the same reason.

Just the other day, for instance, I heard someone tell of three Christian priests who had converted to Islam. But there is a big difference between the wisdom of age (which can recognise the wisdom in other religions) and the kind of belief that easily assimilates. Age-wisdom is rooted in our own formation in Christianity; it is more spiritual than intellectual. It is the eventual fruit of lives shaped in an earlier crucible of faith.

Sticking for a moment with the example of Islam, many European women are converting to it today for a different reason: its dress code and religious practice allows them to be themselves. They are disgusted by western expectations that put pressure on them to look as attractive as possible. Here we see supposedly Christianised society viewed not as an intellectual system but in a kind of spiritual way, the way that it treats women.

This sheds light on our own beliefs in a way that rarely happens in church discourse. It's true that Christians do criticise modern society (often vehemently) but it's as if they can somehow dissociate themselves from it. By contrast a religious critique from outside does not merely comment on society; it also criticises the religion that generated that society and ultimately shares its values. This is where we



The Rev. Masud Ibn Syedullah TSSF

My Neighbour: A Gift of God

Celebration's annual conference was an exceptionally stimulating event this year, under the gifted leadership of the Rev. Masud Ibn Syedullah TSSF, an Episcopal priest with an unusual pedigree: he has the distinction of being raised as the son of a Muslim father and a Pentecostal mother.

As a result, he has a thorough understanding (and respect for) both Islam and Christianity, even if his background does occasionally give him problems in current times, e.g. when passing through immigration at airports.

That background also made him especially qualified to speak on the subject of *My Neighbour: A Gift of God*, in which he emphasised the importance of embracing the other as part of our faith.

There were four main sessions: (1) Creation as a gift from God, (2) Humanity, a community of mutuality, (3) God the relentless, passionate lover and (4) Challenged to be rooted in faith, yet generous in hospitality.

Each of these sessions was introduced with an assertion rooted in scriptures. For example, "As Christians we believe that all people are part of God's creation, and are a gift to the planet and to each other." After a plenary address, we would split into small groups to discuss a number of questions on the topic before coming back together to share thoughts, reflections and ideas.

We talked about incarnation: how God is in creation and we are part of that, not over against it. We spoke too about the variety of images of God in the Bi-

ble (good shepherd, father of prodigal son etc) and reminded ourselves of the words of the Baptismal covenant in the American prayer book: "will you seek and serve Christ in all persons...", as if God is to be wooed from the other.

We also talked about the need to be secure in our faith, not threatened by the other. If people show a radical love for God and others in their lives, we should recognise it: we cannot say the Holy Spirit is not with them.

Of course, all of this was accompanied by the usual Celebration worship, which always seems to add another dimension to things. The intimate setting of the conference facilities also made for plenty of informal conversation and fellowship, and catching up with news from old friends.



Left:
Plenary gathering



Right:
Betty Pulkingham
and Mimi Farra



Left:
A Taizé style
service



Right:
Conference meal



Retreat group meets again

Back row: Phil Bradshaw, Jane Porter, Jeanne Hinton, Robert King, Howard Page-Clark, Bill Farra; Front row: Dave Porter, May McKeown, Margaret Bradshaw, Sue King, Jodi Page-Clark

The group of old community friends who met five months ago gathered together again at the Green Pastures centre in Poole at the end of October. The group had no name and no agenda, but there was plenty to talk about.

It is still early days. There was a good deal of sharing, worship and reflection on the issues that had affected all our lives over the years. The question in the background of all our discussion



was whether we saw ourselves continuing and in what form, and whether we would seek to enlarge the group in due course.

Inclusiveness is everyone's instinct, yet we recognised that there is a tension between intimacy and breadth. Unless there is a solid foundation into which others can come, too much expansion too soon could easily destroy the dynamic already established. Nevertheless, we were very conscious of many old friends who we would have loved to have had with us.

To move forward in any sense inevitably involves structure, so we began to feel our way towards what that would

mean. We saw the group as a place of support, sharing, being acquainted with each other's journeys, praying for one another. One possibility, to help keep things focused between meetings, was a daily common act such as a form of liturgy including a special collect.

We discussed a possible rule of life, elements of which might include an annual retreat and spiritual direction. A rule needed to grow out of what was happening rather than being imposed, but we acknowledged that it would require a level of commitment.



Interestingly, a website was not thought to be particularly helpful at this point, though not ruled out. Many of us are already in touch through sites such as Facebook and Plaxo, and a special site would be demanding both to set up and to maintain. Of more practical help might be a Skype telephone link.

Of course, our time would not be complete without a celebration, which we duly did in style with Robert's excellent home made wine. We concluded the weekend by praying for each other and agreeing on a couple of dates for next year. As one person put it: "Can't wait for next time!"



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need to be able to access the wisdom of ages in our own heritage. We may not be able to see ourselves as clearly as others see us, but we need the clarity that comes from being able to distil what is truly essential in our faith.

What is essential might not be what we expect at first sight. It requires reflection - a worthy preoccupation for my imagined elderly Jesus and his followers! Actually you do see this to some extent in the New Testament, particularly in the epistles of John. Many doctrines and disputes had arisen by that time, but in the end, says John, it's all about loving one another. If you lose sight of that, you've lost the plot.

From the standpoint of our particular spiritual heritage I suppose we might say that despite its benefits the cult of the freedom of the individual has led in our society to the gradual acceptance of excess, loss of community and common values, a rights-based culture and rejection of the very religion that

supported freedom in the first place. The church cannot detach itself from this, so that it struggles to be either salt or light in society. In fact, to be 'prophetic' often seems to mean being avant garde in introducing ideas into the church that have long since found acceptance in secular society.

Thus what some find attractive in Islam is its logic. It is strongly ethical, it tells you what you need to do, it is a great leveller and it has a strong dimension of social duty to those in need. It maintains a strongly corporate (community) character. Put that into a society which has lost much of that dimension, and it constitutes spiritual vigour. To recapture our own spiritual vigour, we need to be able to recognise the extent to which our religious values are in sympathy with (and shaped by) the prevailing culture.

What may seem like loss of faith in later years is often just boredom with things that don't really matter. It is a letting go of things that were not as

overwhelmingly essential as we once thought. It is one reason (not the only one) for our gathering together of friends whose community experience goes back to the 60s and 70s. We need to try to understand what, amid all the varied and colourful history, were the really important things that still shape our spiritual outlook and our view of the world today.

I would be surprised if we did not conclude that it had something to do with relatedness in community - with being given to God and to one another whatever the structural form. That has many dimensions to it that are often lost in today's religious discourse. The faith that once burned bright in the days of high adventure has not disappeared; it is simply more reflective now, recognising what worked and didn't work but still believing in the spiritual grace we experience when we allow God to be God among us.

Phil Bradshaw

Greenbelt 2008

As usual, we were only able to attend a fraction of the hundreds of events and exhibitions at the famous Christian arts festival this year.

We heard a number of the main speakers, but one who particularly impressed us was Richard Burrigde, Dean of Kings College London. Speaking of the apartheid years, he described how the Dutch Reformed Church had some of the most respected biblical scholars, yet justified the apartheid system.

Years later, asking those same scholars how they managed to get it so wrong, he received the answer that they had failed to listen to the voices from the other side. The moral for today's religious debates was obvious. It was a theme that permeated the festival: the need to listen to the other.

Images of Greenbelt:

Clockwise from top: CMS Tent; Philip Yancey; part of Christian Aid third world exhibition; John Bell; tall man; Department for International Development banner; the RT Hon. Douglas Alexander MP, Minister for International Development



Celebration USA: PO Box 309, 809 Franklin Avenue, Aliquippa PA 15001, USA
Email: mail@communityofcelebration.com Website: www.communityofcelebration.com

CCCT: 35 Cavendish Road, Redhill, Surrey RH1 4AL. Tel. 01737 778760
Email: celebration@ccct.co.uk Website: www.ccct.co.uk