

Changing world; Changing Church?

Address by Timothy Radcliffe to the Forum of Churches Together in England: 2009

In July, when I was waiting for a flight from Sydney to Los Angeles, I popped into a bookshop to see what was in the religious section. I deny that I was checking whether they had any of my books! There were over a hundred titles, most of them New Age spirituality, but with a good number attacking all forms of religion, the usual piles of Dawkins and Hitchens. The only book that I spotted that was in any way pro-Christian was a life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. So, evidence of both an interest in spirituality, as long as it is not Christian, and also, for others, of a deep mistrust of all religion.

How is Christianity to flourish in this bracing climate? As I was pondering this question I looked out of my window at the vigorous white beam in our garden at Blackfriars. What makes it so alive? First of all, it is completely one. From the top leaf to the deepest root, it is a vital unity. It is itself. If Christianity is to be vibrant in this century, then we need a vigorous Christian life. The spiritual life originally meant all the aspects of Christian living in their integrity: reflective, prayerful, imaginative and moral. It was only in the fourteenth century that this unity began to unravel, and we find separate disciplines of theology, philosophy, ethics, spirituality and so on. But once theology drifts away from the life of prayer and the moral life, then it tends to become arid and abstract. When I arrived at immigration in Los Angeles, the officer asked me why I was coming to the USA. I told him that I was going to a conference on theology. 'Oh,' he said, 'the heavy stuff.' And once ethics becomes detached from theology and prayer, then it tends to become moralistic, concerned with what is forbidden or compulsory. And spirituality on its own, detached from doctrine and ethics, easily becomes warm and woolly, and one moves from looking at trees to hugging them. So, if Christianity is to flourish in this century, then we need to recover the unity of the Christian living: intelligent, moral, prayerful and imaginative.

But secondly, that vibrant white beam is alive at its extremities: Its leaves receive the light of the sun and convert it into sugars; they are open to the rain, the wind and the occasional splodges of bird dropping. Its bark is its living skin, and its roots burrow down into the soil. A tree that was hermetically sealed from its environment would die. It is itself by being open to what is not itself. Christianity too will only be vigorous if we are open to what is not Christian, to all that is nourishing and challenging in our society.

So we need a confident Christian culture, which enables us to see the world in terms of blessing and gratitude, redemption and salvation. But a culture which is open to the questions and insights of our contemporaries of whatever faith or none. We have to resist both the cosy security of the ghetto and the passivity of assimilation. This has been the challenge for Judaism for centuries. Jonathan Sachs wrote a little book, *Shall we have Jewish grandchildren?* You must face that question: Shall you have Christian grandchildren? At least as a Catholic priest I won't have any grandchildren at all, which is one less thing to worry about! So the Church will only flourish if we have both the integrity of that white beam and its openness beyond itself. Then we shall be a sign of the Kingdom: 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which someone took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.' (Luke 13. 18f)

Jesus says to the disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.' (Mat. 28.19f). Our mission is to teach a doctrine and a moral obedience to all that Jesus commanded.. I would suggest that for Christianity to thrive in this changing world, we need a doctrine that is confident but not doctrinaire, that lives from the tradition and from interaction with our doubting, searching society. And we need a morality which is not moralistic but engages with our contemporaries in their search for the good.

The doctrine of the Trinity is like the trunk of our tree. Christian life begins with baptism in its name. Though there was an ancient Irish Dominican called Cardinal Brown who had been Master of the Order and papal theologian. When he was a child he had been baptised in emergency by a nun. In his old age he tracked her down in order to thank her. She said, 'Your Eminence, it was a great honour for me to baptise you... in the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.' Suddenly he thought: if I was never properly baptised, then I am not ordained and, worst of all, not a Cardinal!

The assumption of our society is that doctrine is dangerous and divisive. It embodies the arrogant assumption that we can wrap up the truth of God and impose it on others. Only stupid and unreflecting people accept doctrine. And many Christians suspect this too. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is obscure celestial mathematics, like counting angels on a pinhead. What does it offer the young struggling to find employment and facing the prospect of ecological catastrophe?

But I deeply believe that the flourishing of the Church in this century depends on our rediscovery of the excitement of doctrine. The Trinity, for example, may be a mystery beyond our understanding, but, as Tom Groome of Boston College said, it is the mystery that explains everything. It is the mystery of perfect, equal love, free of all domination or patriarchy. From the moment that teenagers develops their first crush on the gym teacher, they are involved in the exploration of that Triune love. The parent struggling to raise a child into an adult and mature love, is living its mystery.

It is a doctrine that is always necessarily surprising, because it is our sharing in the life of the God who makes all things new. It is our glimpse of the God who is, as Aquinas said, pure act, utterly dynamic. He even wondered whether the word 'God' might be better understood as a verb than a noun. Orthodoxy is always an adventure, an astonishing glimpse, as if for the first time, of the life for which we are made. If not it is what Karl Rahner called the heresy of dead orthodoxy.

And so the Church can only thrive if we are both steeped in tradition but also engage imaginatively with our contemporaries. Alistair McGrath has argued that atheism captured the imagination of the nineteenth century. It seemed a vast liberation from a bossy oppressive God. But the godless regimes of the 20th century showed that atheism often led to the killing fields and the concentration camps. So, despite all the blustering of Dawkins and Hitchens, the field is open, if we can capture the imagination of the young today with the adventure of orthodoxy, which also means letting ourselves be captured by their imagination.

There was a young priest in Krakow called Karol Wojtyła, a poet and a playwright. When the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Wyszyński, was looking for a new auxiliary bishop of Krakow,

Wojtyła was at the bottom of his list. He was a dreamer, a man with his head in the clouds, not the sort of person to fight the Communists. The Communists were in favour of Wojtyła for exactly the same reason, and were delighted at his appointment. But Wojtyła believed in what he called the theatre and poetry of resistance. He believed that the only way to oppose Communism was to touch the imagination of the Poles. When the Poles could again imagine a different world, a radiant world, the dull and shabby world of Soviet Communism just collapsed.

Teaching happens in the encounter of the tradition with the contemporary imagination, with its doubts and questions and experience. It does not matter whether the people who inspire us are Christian or not. My brother, Chrys McVey quoted Exodus 33.1: "Anyone who wished to consult the Lord would go to the meeting tent outside the camp" and commented: "It is outside the camp, in all the Galilees that surround us, where we discover what mission is: to be in mission is to be outside the camp. And to discover with others what God is really about"¹.

Rowen Williams and A. N. Wilson conducted a wonderful discussion at the Haye on Wye Literary Festival this year, on faith and imagination. Rowen showed just how stimulating someone like Philip Pullman can be for Christians, even though he appears to oppose us in many ways. When I was flying to Sydney, I watched again that wonderful film, *The Children of a Lesser God*, the story of a man who teaches in a school for the deaf, and falls deeply in love with a beautiful angry woman who is imprisoned in silence. At one moment she signs to him, 'Unless you can let me be an 'I' as you are an 'I', I cannot let you into my silence to know me.' I thought 'Yes. What an insight into love.' And I rushed down the aisle, tears streaming from my face, to beg the stewardess for a piece of paper so that I could write it down. She probably thought, 'Another nutter who has had too much to drink.'

So solid teaching, sound doctrine, is always a venture into the unknown, an exposure to the surprise of God. A Triune love liberates us from the easy dichotomies to which our culture is so prone: left/right; right/wrong; progressive/conservative. The love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father is always a liberation into the unknowable freedom of the Spirit, pushing us beyond easy and introverted antagonisms and infatuations. It is the voice of the Good Shepherd calling us out of the security of narrow little sheepfolds into broader pastures. Tom Beaudoin of Fordham has written beautifully of 'the irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X.' He wrote: 'We search for faith in the midst of profound theological, social, personal and sexual ambiguities.'² We show our confidence in the tradition, in Augustine and Aquinas and the Eastern Fathers, precisely by daring to venture into ambiguities, not quite sure where we will end up.

Now this may seem academic, remote from the ordinary business of running our Churches, of coping with opening or closing parishes, or founding youth groups and prayer groups. But I do believe that it is fundamental for the flourishing of Christianity in this changing world, because everything depends upon whether we can share with the young our surprise in the God who is ever new.

¹ 'Meeting Do outside the camp'

² *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* San Francisco 1998

For this to happen, we need faithful questioners. Such people are entirely different from the sceptic of the Enlightenment, who stands apart, watching everyone with detached suspicion, doubting everything. That radical scepticism was necessary for the birth of modern science, for which we are deeply grateful but it is deadly in the life of the Church. When I was Provincial, there was a brother on the Council, who never said anything during our prolonged discussions. He would just sit on the edge, watching us sceptically. And then when we were finished, and had voted, he would always say, 'This discussion was wrong headed from the beginning, and I totally dissociate myself from the decision.' It drove me crazy!

The faithful questioner needs to be deeply embedded in his or her community. In my own Church I think of people like Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner. It is surely no coincidence that all of these were Jesuits and Dominicans, members of religious communities who supported them in their searching. When Congar wondered how he could endure rejection in the 1950s, he concluded, 'le fait des frères enfin.'³ 'It is the fact of brothers, in the end'. Our own faithful questioners, open to a surprising glimpse of the mystery of Triune love, need to be accompanied, never left isolated, especially when we disagree with them. Otherwise the leaf may drop off the tree and we shall lose its nourishment. And they will only be able to survive being exposed to the sun, the wind, the rain and the occasional splodge of bird droppings, if they are sustained by a Christian *life*, which is reflective, spiritual and moral. Again, we see the need for that unity of theology, philosophy, prayer and a life of virtue if Christianity is to flourish. Let's glance at each of these in turn.

One of the instinctive barriers against our faith is the assumption that Christianity is a relic of the Dark ages, before humanity grew up and began to think rationally. Our belief in God and miracles are relics from an age of superstition. But Pope Benedict argued in his controversial speech in Regensburg, that so-called Age of Reason was the triumph of a particular narrow, empirical understanding of reason. It is a shrunken rationality, which can no longer reflect upon fundamental questions of meaning, such as the origin and destiny of humanity, the nature of human happiness and freedom. Nothing is counted as scientific unless it can be measured and tested. For all its glorious technological achievements – and I too delight in my Iphone – our society is rather infantile in its debates about the big issues. And so the Pope concludes: 'The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur – this is the programme with which a theology grounded in Biblical faith enters into the debates of our time.'⁴

Central to the pastoral mission of the Church in the 21st century is that it be an oasis of wisdom, a place where people learn to talk and listen intelligently, seeking the truth in love, with faith and reason. We are the children of the Logos, the incarnate Wisdom of God. The trouble is that although Christians say that we believe in reason, it often does not look as if we really do. We do not behave like people who really believe that through debate we can engage with people who think differently and move towards the truth. But this should be one of our great gifts to a society which has lost confidence in the possibility of truth.

Let me really stick out my neck. I suspect that in some Churches, including my own, we fail through too much silence. We so value unity that sometimes we are afraid of intellectually

³ *Journal d'un théologien 1946 – 1956* p.422

⁴ 'Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections' Regensburg 12 September 2006

pursuing the truth, lest, like St Peter, we be taken where we do not wish to go . But if we really believe that reason and faith are not incompatible, then we should be unafraid of any debate, because hard reason cannot lead us away from God. St Thomas Aquinas was unafraid of any question. In the tens of thousands of questions that he considered only one was dismissed as utterly foolish, and that was the idea that money makes the world go round. He would have considered our society rather stupid. But a unity that is not founded on the truth is not a Christian unity. It risks being mere timid conformism.

Other Christian Churches, whom I am too polite to mention, fail to witness to a faith in reason because rather than silence, there is too much noise. Theologians thunder, bishops bluster, priests pontificate, but there is little shared searching, real engagement with difference. Here the temptation is to value my truth at the expense of unity, but a truth that does not heal division is not a Christian truth. It is in danger of falling into mere ideology and party politics.

In our world of spin and soundbite, where discussion often takes the form of rubbishing the opposition, our churches should embody charitable and rational debate, where we are seen to seek the truth together. To a thirsty world we say 'drink your fill of understanding, o my soul, and drink wisdom, o my heart.' (4 Ezra 8.4)

For this to happen our faithful questioners need a deep spiritual life: a life of prayer which keeps keen the sense of God, the instinct for what is true. Congar said, 'I have loved the truth as I have loved a person.'⁵ It requires a vast humility, since what is at issue is not my truth, my vindication, but the truth and what that is may takes years to emerge, even after one's death. When Congar was asked whether he believed that he had the right answers, he replied that he did not know, but he was asking the right questions. We all can think of controversial theologians who have not resisted the temptation to become celebrities and present themselves as victims, and to grab the microphone on every possible occasion. When Pope Pius IX was asked by a friend to write a preface for a book, he asked why? 'In order to sell more copies of the book.' 'I can do better than that. I can put it on the Index of Prohibited Books.' For Aquinas, the beatitude, 'Blessed are those who mourn', was especially appropriate for theologians, because to study is always to find oneself letting go of false images of God, grieving as one is drawn deeper into the cloud of unknowing.

So our faithful questioners, the leaves of the ecclesial tree, can only flourish as they unfold into the wind, the rain and the sun, if they are sustained by a life that is conducive to wisdom: rational, moral and spiritual. Then our great doctrines, such as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, can fruitfully engage with our contemporaries, and be discovered by us as exciting and liberating and true.

When Jesus sent out the disciples to baptise people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he also told them to 'teach all that I have commanded you.' (Mat 28.20). If there is one thing that our society detests more than doctrine, dismissed as doctrinaire, then it is morality understood as moralism.

The Church finds itself in a paradoxical position. The media more than ever want to know what stand church leaders take on moral issues. People expect you to give moral guidance, and are angry if you are silent. Simultaneously, the Church's moral teaching is resented. It is

⁵ *Building Bridges* p.97

seen as intolerant of people who have made, as they say, 'other lifestyle options.' And what right do men with pointy hats have to tell me what to do? Moral teaching is resented as an external constraint on our actions. Doctrine tries to control our minds and moral teaching our actions. So Christianity is seen as a culture of control in the world of the free.

But this is seriously mistaken. Charles Taylor has plotted in *A Secular Age* the emergence of the culture of control. Absolute Kings tried to force the churches to submit to their power. We see the emergence of the centralised state. The poor are no longer seen as our brothers and sisters in Christ but as a menace to be imprisoned. The mentally ill are confined in what Michel Foucault called 'le grand renferment', the great lock up. We see the emergence of standing armies and eventually a police force, and escalation of legislation, culminating in the present obsession with health and safety. Recently a children's book was published on a cuddly pink dragon who used to toast his marshmallows with his fiery breath. I am told that had to be rewritten since fire breathing dragons are against health and safety!

Some church submitted to external control and others, especially my own, attempted to resist so as to retain our freedom. With varying success we resisted the Holy Roman Emperor, the claims of Absolute Monarchs, the nineteenth century Empires and twentieth century communism. In the process, the Catholic Church became itself rather infected with the culture of control. The price of freedom was that the Church came to look rather like those whom she opposed. In trying to be counter-cultural, we often ended up conforming to the secular culture of control. But if we believe that the world is in the hands of God's providence, then our churches should be deeply counter-cultural, oases of freedom in the nanny state.

But how can we offer moral teaching and still be seen as living with the freedom of the children of God? The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sachs, told me recently that in Hebrew there is no word for 'obey' in the sense of submit to commands. When the State of Israel was founded and such a word was needed, it had to be borrowed from Aramaic. The Ten Commandments were not understood as constraining. They are ten words of friendship, inviting Israel to share God's freedom, who called them out of slavery. They were given to Moses, to whom God spoke as to a friend. They make no sense outside the context of friendship.

I cannot help be reminded of a Dominican who was chaplain to Polish regiment during the Second World War. On the night before the battle of Montecassino, he looked out of his tent and saw thousands of soldiers queuing up for confession. What was he to do? This was before General Absolution had been invented, let alone forbidden (talk about a culture of control!). So he got them to lie down with their faces on the ground, and then he read out the list of the commandments. If you have broken one of the commandments, wiggle your left leg, and with your right leg indicate how many times!

Jesus gave his new commandment to the disciples when he called them no longer his servants but his friends. Richard Burridge, the Dean of Kings, London, has pointed out that Jesus 'kept bad company while teaching good morals.'⁶ He ate and drank with prostitutes and tax collectors, he had the most disreputable friends, and yet he preached the Sermon on the Mount and asked us to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. The exigencies

⁶ *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* Grand Rapids 2007 p.72

were those of God's friendship. It is only in the visible context of friendship that we can give moral teaching. Joseph Pieper paraphrased Aquinas on why only a friend can give moral teaching to someone: 'A friend, that is a prudent friend, can help to shape a friend's decision. He does so by virtue of that love which makes the friends' problem his own, and the friend's ego his own.'⁷

It is only in friendship that we can share people's moral searching. Doctrine is alive. I suggested, in imaginative engagement with our contemporaries. We discover with them glimpses of the God who is ever new. And moral teaching is alive only in friendship with our contemporaries, when we can discover the unexpected goodness of God, and how his friendship leads us in paths that we could never have anticipated. Jesus' parables always push his hearers beyond what seemed to be the only alternatives. Holiness is surprising.

This has radical consequences for how the Church teaches. For example, much tension revolves around what the churches say about homosexuality. But I would suggest that we can say nothing outside the context of an evident friendship with gay people. It is only in friendship, listening and praying together that we can discover the right word, the unexpected word that in ways that we never have anticipated is both a fruit of the tradition and the word for today. Again Jesus' parables push people beyond what seemed to be the only alternatives.

The press longs for us to rule on what is permitted or forbidden and hates us when we do so. But the scandal of MPs expenses shows just how bankrupt is a morality which is based on external constraints. It is not enough to say 'I did not break the rules.' I suspect that this is why all over the world, there is a renewed interest in the virtue ethics of Aristotle and Aquinas. Being virtuous is not about submission to rules but about becoming someone. We are called to be courageous, prudent and temperate. We become people whose joy and freedom is found in God. To refrain from evil because it is forbidden is not, for Aquinas, to be virtuous. It is an infantile first step towards virtue. The virtuous person learns to do the good with joy and spontaneity. The virtues form us for the joy and freedom of friendship with each other and with God.

This should be our witness to our contemporary culture of control. But it will often be misunderstood. One of the worst experiences of my life was giving a lecture to 500 Mauritian teenagers on sexual ethics, when I had the flu, in bad French. Having spoken for an hour about the beauty of sexuality, based on Jesus' words, 'This is my body, given for you', all I received were endless questions about the rules: 'Can I sleep with my boy friend?' 'How far can I go?' 'Is gay sex permitted?'

The press are usually no more sophisticated. Everything that we say risks being banalised out of existence. Whether you agree or disagree with *Humanae Vitae*, it is undeniably a profound exploration of the beauty of sexuality, and yet it was invariably reduced to the three words: 'Pope bans pill.' Maybe all that we can do is to seek to live in friendship, especially with the despised, those who are regarded with contempt and in friendship with God, and then we shall discover what we are to say, which will be old and new. In that bookshop in Sydney, the only Christian book that I discovered was, you remember, the life of Mother

⁷ *Four Cardinal Virtues* p.29 check.

Teresa of Calcutta. She said all sorts of things that go against the grain of modernity, but we could see that she embodied God's friendship for the poorest and the dying.

A changing Church for a changing world? Remember that white beam; it is utterly itself, from the outermost leaf to the deepest root. We need confidently to be ourselves, living from a Christian culture which is theological, imaginative, ethical and spiritual. We need a Christian *life*. But the tree lives from its interactions with what is not itself. A hermetically sealed tree would quickly die. So too, I believe that the world thirsts for sound teaching, good doctrine. But our teaching will only be alive if it is always rediscovered through imaginative engagement with our contemporaries. If we are not constantly surprised, then we are not talking of God, to whom we are joined as to the unknown, Aquinas said.

The world also thirst for moral guidance. It longs to be told what is allowed and then resents us doing so. What we offer is the exigencies of friendship, with each other and God. But friendship with God is always surprising in its demands. And so we shall only offer vibrant doctrine and moral teaching is alive if we are courageous and dare to risk being misunderstood. If we are timid, then Christianity will not thrive.

Timothy Radcliffe 2009