

## 'JESUS SHAPED CHURCH- CHRISTIAN SHAPED LIVES'

Four talks given to a PCN conference at Bloomsbury Baptist Church, London

15 September 2012

### **4 A CHRISTIAN SHAPED LIFE**

More years ago than I care to remember I was a youth officer in the Church and for a time these wristbands were very popular in church youth work. They bear the letters WWJD, which stand for What Would Jesus Do? They became one of those evangelical type slogans centred around the person of Jesus.

You know the joke about the Sunday School teacher who was teaching a lesson about always being prepared and working hard. She wanted to use squirrels as an example of such workers. She started the lesson by saying, "I'm going to describe something, and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is." The children were excited to show her what they knew and leaned forward eagerly.

"I'm thinking of something that lives in trees (pause) and eats nuts (pause)..." No hands went up. "It can be grey or brown (pause) and it has a long bushy tail (pause)..." The children looked around the room at each other, but still no one raised a hand. "It chatters (pause) and sometimes it flips its tail when it's excited (pause)..."

Finally one little boy shyly raised his hand. The teacher breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Okay, Michael. What do you think it is?" "Well," said the boy, "it sure sounds like a squirrel, but I guess the answer's supposed to be Jesus."

Yes for many Jesus is the Answer as the Church bill board proclaimed and someone had scribbled underneath, yes but what's the question?

We know that when some Christians say that Jesus is the answer, that's really shorthand which unpacks all those doctrinal beliefs which we discussed earlier. So 'Jesus is the answer to your sinful life, you need to take Jesus into your life and be saved' kind of approach.

I want to rescue Jesus of Nazareth from these fundamentalists. I still use these armbands and ask the question what would Jesus do? Often there is no easy answer. What would Jesus do about the arms race or global warming or euthanasia or abortion or gay marriage? Its not explicit in the text is it? But of course the question we need to ask is that posed a long time ago by Leonard Hodgson, who was Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford from 1944 to 1958. And the question is simply this : If Jesus did what he did and said what he said 2000 years ago in Lower Galilee, what would he do and say to day in the United Kingdom?

In other words can we shape our lives and the life of our communities around general precepts, which we glean from this Jesus of the gospels? And my answer is yes of course we can. I have tried to outline the life of Jesus and the passions of Jesus, a life lived passionately for God. Often I ask groups of people what are you passionate about and are our passions in any way aligned to those of Jesus? Do we show compassion to all in need? Are we concerned to build a world where the rich do not exploit the poor? Do we find more grace in giving rather than receiving? Are we peacemakers? Do we love the stranger in our midst? And so on. In the last talk I tried to see how the Christian Church also could

be shaped by this way of Jesus. The early followers after all described themselves as being in the Way.

I am trying to hold two things together; one, the importance of Jesus's life and teachings as an exemplar of godly living and two the importance of living out such a life in the company of others within a Christian church context. For me the shaping of my world view, the priorities for living, the attitudes I carry, were not worked out and formed at the bottom of the garden, having read scores of books on theology and the historical Jesus, important though that might be. Rather I have been shaped by living within a Christian community, by searching and discovering with others the significance of the Jesus of the gospels.

Jim Wallis was once asked why he didn't forget the church and simply talk about Jesus, to which he replied, How do I look at the head without the body?

For a Jesus shaped church to lead to a Christian shaped life, such a community cannot have high walls around it to protect itself from that spiritually bankrupt world out there. Rather we belong to the world and in our places of work and leisure, in our streets and our city centres the God revealed in Jesus is fully at work. The task is to connect, to see how that vision of the world, how those passions of Jesus were being expressed by others, people of all faiths or none. For the God who filled out the life of Jesus was not owned by him or the church. When people speak of the hidden Christ of Hinduism, for example, I guess they mean that the ways in which people live out their human existence and the qualities of such lives can be such as to reveal that Ground of All Being. Irenaeus talks of the glory of God being seen in a person fully alive. I can think today, and you can of course as well, of scores of people who are passionate about changing our world, our communities for good. I think of the authors of *The Spirit Level*, arguing the case for a more equal society; I think of the thousands of people who volunteer to work for Oxfam and other charities.

So a Christian shaped life, lived out with the same passions which drove Jesus, would not be triumphalist or arrogant about the truth. Rather it would be a life open hearted towards people of other faiths and none, who shared those same passions. This would energise interfaith dialogue. This is how I understand Hans Kung's call for a Global Ethic, uniting people around the world.

A Christian Shaped life, nurtured in a Jesus Shaped Church would necessarily engage with the powers and principalities of this world, as did Jesus. For that kingdom teaching of Jesus implies a world where God rules and not Caesar. Rather than a Christendom which allowed itself to be shaped by the establishment, by worldly powers, a Christian shaped life would offer a critique of power and policies, measured and evaluated against those teachings of Jesus.

In general, however, Christian churches have often preferred to speak of private morality than public affairs. We have taken a dim view of humanity, fallen creatures in a fallen world. I groan when I pass churches reminding people from their wayside pulpits how sinful they are. That may be so but think of that structural sin which encompasses so much of our world. Recently some colleagues of mine went to a meeting at Bishopthorpe in York, where there was an address by the new Bishop of Durham, Justin Welby. I haven't met Mr Welby but he is clearly an experienced manager who worked in the petroleum oil industry and I am sure he is a kind and good bishop. He will I hope be a champion for the poor in this country. But in his address he stated that

*“The question that faces the church both domestically and internationally, is that of what is human flourishing, good news, amidst the deep poverty that still grips many parts of the world and the utter spiritual bankruptcy and increasing material poverty in slump hit Britain?”*

It was the phrase ‘utter spiritual bankruptcy’ that attracted my attention. Do I feel as if I am living in such a spiritually bankrupt society? This raises for us questions not only about human flourishing, which the bishop is quite rightly concerned about, but how human beings make moral judgements and live out their lives in this post modern, post Christendom world. And I think I would make two comments about this kind of pronouncement. First the Church needs to be humble about its own record of ethical behaviour. The recent wave of scandals of child abuse perpetrated by priests has had enormous repercussions in catholic countries especially. Alongside the official pronouncements on contraception there are many Catholics now who turn their backs on the teachings of their Church. Similarly in my own church our hesitation over the acceptance of women into the episcopacy and the opposition to gay marriage has offended many loyal Anglicans whilst to most younger folk, the Church seems increasingly like a dinosaur, at best an irrelevance, at worst a dangerous interference.

But secondly I do not share the view that our society is spiritually bankrupt, any more or less than in previous generations. If like my mother at 95 years of age, you are bewildered by the pace of change, there is a yearning for a return to the Good Old Days, when neighbours knew each other, when the village policeman gave you a clip around the ear, when families sat around the table to eat, when children could play safely outside on their bikes and the summers were always sunny.

But lets not forget the extreme poverty in which many people lived, the lack of decent sanitation for many, the abuse of wives by many husbands, the prejudice shown to people of different skin colour, the putting away into asylums those considered mentally lunatic.

No it’s a hard task to generalize about generations of people and I guess too it depends on your temperament and personality. Being an EFNJ on the Myers Briggs matrix, I carry a bullish view of progress and tend to see the half full glass. I see waves of compassion for strangers when a tragedy occurs, flowers and teddy bears put on railings, sponsored runs and walks to raise money for cancer victims; young adults whose friendships and loyalties are far stronger than when I was at school or in work. Life is very bleak for many people and at times there does seem to be a kind of moral bankruptcy. Some of you may have seen the Panorama programme earlier this week of children growing up on a sink estate in Blackburn. There could be lots to criticize about parental care but What would Jesus Do? I think he would show instincts of care and compassion and get stuck in, creating all kinds of ways to help those people. But secondly Jesus might rail against the inequalities and the injustices which creates the kind of society where people live out lives in such misery and deprivation.

We have mentioned how many have looked to the Christian faith for inspiration but discarded its supernatural claims, back to Don Cupitt’s solar living. I still believe that for millions of our fellow citizens the Christian church at the local level is seen as a force for good, for goodness, if not for God. There are bridges to be built, experiences of life to be shared. I rather think, forgive the phrase, that we are better thinking of life and faith and our relationships in the world as ‘We are all in this together’.

One book which I constantly recommend, not least for group study is this one by the late Adrian Smith, in which he offers the characteristics of a life shaped by the struggle to make

meaningful the Christian faith for today's world. The subtitle of the book is A new framework for Christian living.

Today, seven years after this book was published there is a profound conviction that how we live out our lives is more important than what we believe as a set of guiding doctrines. You can see this in the PCN 8 points. A number of recent books point in this direction. Dave Tomlinson's latest book has as its title : How to be a Bad Christian and a Better Human Being. Gretta Vosper's book : With or Without God : Why the Way we Live is More Important Than What we believe. You get the drift.

Remember the people in that quiz sheet, when I ask who do you think is most Christian? Time and again it is those who have shown the qualities of mercy, love and forgiveness which are selected.

There are three quotations which I want to leave you with in this last talk and the first is from Teilhard de Chardin, who described people as 'spiritual beings simply trying to express their humanity' And secondly Desmond Tutu, who says simply 'I am because We are.' Finally St Francis of Assisi's charge to his friars when sending them out on a mission: "Preach the gospel everywhere; if necessary use words".

## **QUESTIONS**

- 1. What would you find most challenging for you personally about a Christian shaped life?**
- 2. What would a Christian shaped life seek to change in our contemporary society?**