

## 'JESUS SHAPED CHURCH- CHRISTIAN SHAPED LIVES'

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

15 September 2012

### **2. A CHURCH SHAPED CHRISTIANITY**

Allow me to take a trip down memory lane in regard to the church and as I do so maybe it will resonate with you. The year is 1957, I am 8 years old and this is the church as I experienced it. Sunday: I go to church, not with my parents, who might go later to evening prayer, but on my own. Yet I know that when I get to the church there will be other boys and girls there. It's morning prayer, lots of sung canticles, a longish sermon, the boys sit in the right hand side aisle, the girls in the left. The service largely washes over me, I idle away the time by reading the Table of Affinity in my Prayer Book, : 'A man may not marry his daughter's son's wife' and so on. The service ended, I dash home for Sunday dinner. Dad will have gone to the corner shop for the Sunday paper, the only shop open. After dinner at 2pm I go to Sunday School in the large, decaying parish hall, the old Victorian church, now with its polished floor used on occasion for parish dances. There are chairs all around the edge of the hall. Again the boys are in one hall, this hall with the polished floor and the girls are in a newer annex. We sing a hymn, then break up into our classes, sitting in groups on those chairs around the edge of the hall. The teachers are men who seemed ancient but probably were in their 30s and 40s. They take the register, 'yes yes' means I have been to church in the morning as well as Sunday school in the afternoon. I am in line for a prize. There are no visual aids to the teaching, no powerpoint projection, no I pad graphics, just talk. At 3pm, after a final hymn we run out, we assail the toffee shop of Alice Ashurst, she opens specially for us. Then its back to my model railway or in summer maybe a trip on the bus to Southport or going to grandmas for tea.

I would be confirmed at 11 or 12, as would most of my friends at grammar school. If you weren't confirmed you might be a Methodist, not many of them. As for the Roman Catholics they had their own rituals and their own schools.

All of us could tell such a story of a Church, which, whilst it had steadily declined since arguably the First World War, nevertheless had a significant role to play in the community and in peoples lives.

I loved St Luke's Church. Baptised there, Christine and I were married there in 1977, another Jubilee Year. I wrote a short history of the church, I shall be buried there, unless I am lost at sea.

Why did I love it? Because, on reflection, it offered a sense of place and community and belonging. It was not odd to go to church, it was just what you did on Sunday. We took for granted the faith of the Church, we never thought to question, we said the creeds and sang the hymns but its real strength was in offering a narrative on life, a meaning to human existence which made reference to Jesus of Nazareth and the God of the Christian faith. That God was a keeper of morals who cares for his sheep; the church did this through baptising, marrying and burying people. That God, the church told us, calls us to his heaven when our days in Orrell were ended.

Today that church is still there, still the Walking days, still the baptisms and the weddings and burials in its churchyard. It still feels in that Lancashire suburban that it is serving the same purposes as it always has done. But beneath the surface things have changed. Now very few children and young people go to church at all, let alone a Sunday school. Its not

easy to see many people under the age of say 50. The baptisms which are conducted after the main service seem now to be occasions like a wedding, often a chance to celebrate this union of two unmarried people who now have a child but who won't be seen again till another child comes along. The weddings are declining as hotels and desert islands offer package deals. But the funerals remain, that hope for immortality, whatever that means. Soon the church might have to share its vicar with another church as congregations decline, very few people now attend evening prayer and the financial challenges are huge. Beyond the church, Sunday is very different. My dad would have no problem today in getting his Sunday paper, indeed our shopping malls and supermarkets are trading heavily. And children are not confined to playing with the model railway or going to grandmas for tea. Rather parents are whizzing them around to soccer matches or swimming pools. Going to church has become a minority interest, not least for the elderly, until Christmas comes around again and going to church is acceptable for that one time in the year.

That trip down the decades illustrates the huge differences in our way of life over the last 50 years. Today the mainstream denominational churches are facing meltdown in many countries in western Europe. The UK now has the fourth lowest rate of church attendance in Europe, only Hungary, France and Denmark are worse. Peter Brierley, former Head of Christian Research, paints a very gloomy picture of Church attendance in Britain in the coming decades. The loss of young people is most alarming, over 80% of children under 15 now no longer attend church, whilst people in the 30 – 44 age range are attending less frequently because of the pressures of modern living.

And so what is the future for a Church shaped Christianity? Indeed is the Church capable of being the bearer of a Jesus shaped faith in the future?

The story of the development of the church which emerged after the life of Jesus of Nazareth, has been well chronicled but sharpened in recent years through titles such as *Saving Jesus from the Church*, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*.

After the death of Jesus, the influence of Hellenistic thought and mysticism began to change the charismatic Judaism of Jesus and the budding Palestinian Christianity. The trend started with Paul and the Fourth Gospel and the impact of Platonic philosophy on the formulation of Christian theological ideas. The final thrust in this transformation came with the adoption of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine and the first ecumenical council held at Nicaea in 325, which solemnly proclaimed the divinity of Jesus.

Marcus Borg and many others remind us that the central issue is that the church constructed this Christianity through its early Councils to be a system of beliefs, of doctrines and dogmas shaped by the world of that first millennium. There were no heavenly 'truths' handed down from on high, only the machinations of men who reconstructed a system of beliefs, which may have been an authentic attempt to understand their world 1700 years ago but has long since proved to be inadequate. Christian faith was robbed of its central dynamic as a transforming experience of the God power which had so filled the person of Jesus and which is about transforming lives.

This Church then, in its various manifestations dominated the understanding of Christianity, enforcing its creeds and dogmas on a largely uneducated public. Historians can easily demonstrate the horrors of the Church Militant here on earth. Take for example, Simon Montefiore's book on Jerusalem, in which he writes this on the Crusades:

*The Crusade had been the idea of one man. On 27 November 1095 Pope Urban II had addressed a gathering of grandees and ordinary folk at Clermont to demand the conquest of Jerusalem and the liberation of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. By night on July 13 1096 the Crusaders were ready....the fighting raged for three hours; the Franks went berserk, and killed anyone they encountered in the streets and alleyways. They cut off not only heads but hands and feet, glorying in the spurting fountains of cleansing infidel blood.*

The Crusades, the wars against heretics across Europe, the violence and burnings of the Reformation, through to the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and terrorism of our own day, all have given religion a very bad press. With the renaissance of new learning, that medieval hold of religion began of course to break down. The excesses of the western Church of Rome sparked off the Reformation. Cupitt in his remarkable Sea of Faith TV programmes and the likes of Spong have amply show how Newtonian physics, Copernican and Galilean discoveries about the cosmos all contributed to challenge the dogmas of religion. Along came the Quakers, who rejected creeds and dogmas and then Unitarians, who rejected the divinity of Christ. Historical critical analysis of the Bible from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards contributed to a sea change in our understanding and serious theology in our universities changed forever. Jumping forward to our own era the influence of theologians such as Tillich and Robinson's *Honest to God*, then the Myth of God Incarnate debate of the 1970's and the outspokenness of Bishop David Jenkins in the 80's kept the radical questioning voice alive. The Sea of Faith 'movement' dared give voice to the idea that the whole religious enterprise was to be seen as a social construct.

Scientists such as Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins lead the assault on what many consider to be the dangerous irrelevance of religion and the church. Christianity seems to be under attack. Yet at the same time there is a sustained interest in matters of faith and spirituality. And so many theologians and church people try to rescue Christianity from its past and hence Jack Spong's copious output: 'Why Christianity Must Change or Die', 'A New Christianity for a New World', Brian McClaren, 'A New Kind of Christianity', Hilary Wakemen, 'Saving Christianity', Dave Tomlinson 'How to be a Bad Christian and a Better Human Being', and of course back in 1963 John Robinson's 'Honest to God'. And many many more books.

The statistics have told us that many millions of people have simply left the Church, many more cling on to it for different reasons. There is what Spong calls the Church Alumni Association. Recently Mary Kenny wrote in the Guardian newspaper about the demise of Roman Catholicism in Ireland. After cataloguing the many reasons for the decline of the Church – opposition to divorce and abortion, the scandals of abusing priests, an ultra Conservative hierarchy, Kenny writes: 'If the structures of religion are weaker, some of the kind impulses of faith are still there.' 'The kind impulses of faith', lets remember that phrase.

How do we proceed from here? There is a conservative backlash. Pope Benedict, like many Church leaders, blames secular culture for the decline of the Church, and views the world as in a kind of moral vacuum, adrift, at sea, in need of firm anchorage. In January of this year he addressed the American bishops, raising his voice against the dominant culture of secularism in America, and attacking, between the lines, Obama's policy in favour of contraception, gay marriage and abortion. As Jack Spong has said, when you feel under attack, you put your wagons in a defensive circle and start to shoot. This is so often how the Vatican seems to react. It is the conservative sense of guarding the tradition, of handing it over and the present pope exemplifies this conservatism. Pope Benedict desires

to reinvigorate the Latin language, the language of the church. The language of the scientists, of young people, of social reformers is subservient to the language of faith.

In the gospel of John, the writer has Jesus saying that there is more Truth to be gleaned through the agency of the Holy Spirit. So often the Church boxes up the Spirit and packages it to suit its own purposes.

But we must also recognize that along the centuries, the Church has tried to put the image of the Good Shepherd to the fore in so many areas of social betterment – the establishment of church schools, of hospitals and hospices. Chaplains minister in prisons and detention centres, often dealing with the most demanding of human kind. The track record of the Church has many plusses. Indeed Don Cupitt in his book ‘The Meaning of the West’ attributes so much of the democratic and moral bases of life in western Europe to the influence of the Judeo-Christian religion. Cupitt ironically speaks of the God in Jesus coming on earth to show us how to live and now the God is dead and we must get on with living that kind of life. I paraphrase.

So how might we proceed in our desire for a Church shaped Christianity? There has been some movement. The Church of England itself in its many official doctrinal commission reports over the last 50 years has indeed has been prepared to shift ground somewhat over the idea of hell, notions of salvation and ethical issues such as divorce, contraception and indeed same sex unions.

But many writers and commentators and some churchgoers simply believe that the Church is so critically ill that only radical surgery will save it. There is the call by Jack Spong and others simply to ditch so much of what has passed for Christian faith – the edifice of the Creed, notions of hell fire, any literal interpretations of those bible passages which defy modern day knowledge. They rail against the kind of tribal mentality which seeks to defend Christianity. They hold against the Church its record of animosity towards women and gay and lesbian people. For others slightly less critical the Church is seen as an institution offering certain rituals for the important times in human lives, perhaps still offering a cosy glimpse of times past, a nostalgic throw back to more comforting times, the rural idyll of England’s green and pleasant land. Church schools remain very popular and those churches associated with successful schools, still have some hold on families and their belonging.

What does the Church, the churches, look like, from the ground? How have and do they shape Christianity before we consider in the next talk how they might be even more Jesus shaped?

Speaking from the perspective of the Church of England, which is all I can do, one has to say that in its leadership, through the teachings of theological colleges and in other ways, the Church does seem to continue to be very orthodox in its doctrinal and creedal affirmation. This can be seen in the abundance of conservative courses such as Alpha, the very nature of Anglican liturgy and the songs and hymns sung. Perhaps in the face of conservative influences from so many parts of the Anglican Communion, perhaps simply through the refusal to read those more progressive theologians, it seems to me that the Church of England in the main does not seem eager to open the door to the kind of debates around doctrine which characterised the 1970’s. For Archbishop Rowan Williams, who I think has gained a great deal of respect during his tenure of office, people like Jack Spong are seen to be lightweight journalistic type critics who carry little theological respect. The fact that Spong still speaks to packed audiences around the world, after so many years in

retirement shows how impervious the leadership of the Church of England is to criticism of its dogmatic certainties.

Rarely do I come across a church, large or small, that one might call radical in its theology – a church, for example which no longer compels people to say the creed or which uses forms of worship very different from those authorized.

This doctrinally conservative Christianity of course comes in many forms, for the Church is a broad coalition of styles : charismatic revivalism, with its emphasis on prophecy, speaking in tongues etc; Anglo – Catholicism with its sacramental emphasis, conservative evangelical churches with their biblically ‘sound’ teachings around the need for repentance and conversion. Many more churches could be described as middle of the road but again without any radical departure from the orthodoxies of the Church. And what is significant is that overall, less and less people are attending any kind of church. Where there is significant growth, often in the newer freer churches it is at the expense of other more traditional ones.

In the face of decline, other approaches are happening. There is a concentration on the need for fresh expressions of church, but not of theology. And much credit needs to go to those churches brave enough to think out of the box, be it in terms of how they organize their Sunday worship, their music, their Café style churches allowing people to discuss and learn more. There continues to be a great desire to reach out to meet the needs of the community. Indeed the Church at a national level as well as in parishes, can at times be in the forefront of calls for change, seeking justice for asylum seekers, a fair wage, Fairtrade, a more equal society. Indeed most of my time in the context of resourcing mission is to do with raising awareness of so many issues which face our societies and our world. Many people are attracted to the church because it takes seriously the needs of its communities, because it is on the side of the poor and disadvantaged. I often give a group of people a collection of pictures of well known individuals, ranging from the Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury through to Cliff Richard and Anne Widdecombe and I ask them to name the three people they would describe as being the most Christlike. You know what they say – Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King. I point out that Gandhi was Hindu. You see how people are more concerned to see as Christian, not one who believes herself to be saved, not one who holds to correct beliefs, but one who seeks to show compassion to others. This could of course indicate that for many in the church pews, there is far more open ended thinking than we might recognise simply through sitting through an act of worship.

Jack Good, in his book ‘The Dishonest Church’ wrote that :‘A silent pact often exists between pastor and congregation, a pact in which certain difficult issues are to be left unmentioned’. I find this to be implicitly so. Often I sit in the study of a vicar who tells me that his church councils only want to talk about the building or the finances, that they have no ideas about mission and would I lead a day about mission with his church council members. So far so good we agree on the need to move from maintenance to mission. We agree on the need for a lived Christianity. We agree that the person of Jesus is central. But unless we tackle head on the difficult terrain of the nature of our belief in God and our creedal understandings of faith, then I do not believe we will have an honest church, fit to serve 21<sup>st</sup> century people.

So its a sit up and think time. Not only in what is being written but so often in the kinds of talks given at gatherings such as Greenbelt, there is a call for some radical rethinking. Back in the parishes, as I say, my experience is of many clergy, not all, being afraid to unpick too

much of the tradition, in case it all begins to unravel and those few remaining worshippers take themselves and their money away. So more of a tinkering goes on.

So once more comes the question of whether or not the Church is capable of a Jesus shaped Christianity? I have a poster in my office which has a quote from the New Zealand theologian Lloyd Geering, which simply says: "Jesus came to build a kingdom and we ended up with the Church". Can the church change? We have identified clearly enough the problem – namely that emergence of an orthodoxy of belief about the Jesus who became the Christ of the Church. With that came a dogmatic certainty and a set of beliefs and practices, of liturgies and observances which held fast for nearly two thousand years. The influence of the world wide Church in its account of the significance of Jesus the Christ has shaped so much of the culture, the institutions and moral teachings of so many countries across the globe. The Church no longer wages crusades against the infidel, rather we engage in interfaith dialogue. The Church in the West at least is no longer the mouthpiece of government, in its service but rather the opposite.

But in the last two hundred years the Church has also had to face the onset of modernism, the rise of scientific and technological understanding, the breakthroughs in our knowledge of the cosmos. The supernatural superstructure of Christian faith, as promulgated by the medieval churchmen, is no longer convincing to millions of our fellow citizens. We have grown up. The God of Jesus Christ is for many a God of the Gaps, the God on whom we call in times of crisis or the God whom we thank at times of celebration.

Yet at the same time we have not turned to a materialist ideology and across the world such ideologies have been found lacking. Rather there is a thirst for authentic spiritual experience. We seek to be spiritual but not religious. There is still a great respect and nostalgia for our local churches, for the church on the hill in our village, for the church to whom we turn for our Remembrance Day services, our civic events, those times which, as all religion does, binds us in a sense of togetherness.

How then may our churches be so Jesus shaped that we allow them to be communities of Christlike people who follow the way of love and in the power of the Spirit? In the third talk I want to offer a positive way forward for the Church, a church which bears the hallmarks of the passionate man of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

## **QUESTIONS**

- 1. Do you think that the churches do more good than harm?**
- 2. What do you think are the main causes for the decline in church attendance?**