

'JESUS SHAPED CHURCH- CHRISTIAN SHAPED LIVES'

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

15 September 2012

3. A JESUS SHAPED CHURCH

(A YouTube video, 'What is a Church?' preceded this talk)

The challenge of a Jesus shaped church is that it implies a reformation about how we understand both Church and Christianity. Can we ever hope for such a transformation in the face of 2000 years of Christian history and tradition? I have tried to show how understandings of Jesus have changed and developed and how we are rediscovering the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth, the man of God par excellence. Yet many in the Church have shown little inclination to radically rethink the church as modeled around the life of Jesus. In this talk I want to offer encouragement and some pointers to a Jesus shaped Church.

Twelve years ago, Don Cupitt, in his book, 'Reforming Christianity', addressed the question of whether the Reformation of Christianity was possible. At the same time Jack Spong was asking the same question in his book, published in the same year, 'A New Christianity for a New World'. Cupitt writes as a non realist, for whom God is a construct of the human mind and religion a construct needed by human beings. Don, as a priest in the Church of England, has broad sympathies, as we have already noted, with the contribution of Christianity to humanitarian ethics, to the common good and to community well being. His central and uplifting argument is that now the kingdom religion of Jesus, the Jewish teacher, is more interesting to people in general than the elaborate machinery of sacramentally mediated church religion. Kingdom religion, however, that message of Jesus, is, Cupitte says, religious immediacy, it is about 'God' being closer to the believer, about the world ruled by this God. Kingdom religion feels more authentic, more democratic, more personal. Kingdom religion speaks less about doctrines and dogmas and more about journeying and experiencing. The Quakers, the Anabaptists, the Sojourners and other Christian groups exemplified this move towards Kingdom religion in different ways.

Cupitt takes much of the Kingdom teachings of Jesus seriously when they are able to frame an ethical basis for human behaviour and how we treat each other. Kingdom religion then would propagate liberation theology, feminist theology, black theology, queer theology. Kingdom religion challenges militarism. These for Cupitt are all good solid Kingdom causes. The church for Cupitt provides the necessary theatre, the public space in which these causes are acted out. So at its best, the local church draws together, like any membership society, people who share common concerns, ideals, hopes for the kind of world where goodness, virtue, equality, peace, fairness, tolerance, love, all flourish. Christians might claim that these virtues relate to the fruits of the Spirit and to the power of God at work in human beings. Cupitt denies God as a metaphysical reality, discounts a Platonic view of the universe, the painted veil that hangs between us and an eternal world. Cupitt would rid us of ideas of heaven, that particular Kingdom has not and will not come he says. It is this world we have to live in and only this world; this life and only this life and the task is of solar living, that is when all life becomes a sacred continuum, God is scattered into everyone, all ethics becomes humanitarian, human conscience becomes globalised. If there is a task for religion, it is a communal way of reimagining and remaking the self and the world.

As an aside for a moment, this year saw the publication of a popular book by a popular writer Alain de Botton, called Religion for Atheists, in which Botton, not unlike Cupitt,

appreciates so much of what religion has offered to society – its fine buildings, its art and music, its sense of sacred places, its moral virtues of kindness, pity, feelings of community, the rhythm and place of festivals and feasts. More to the point Botton writes :

“It is when we stop believing that religions have been handed down from above or else that they are entirely daft that matters become more interesting. We can then recognize that we invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise.”

So for Cupitt and Botton and indeed for many people of no religious commitment, the Jesus who walked this earth teaching about the Kingdom of God on earth, preaching a message of peace and forgiveness, of challenging the domination systems which oppress the weak and the poor, a man who upheld that global ethic of the Golden Rule, becomes a significant influence for good.

Many Christian writers who hold to some form of theism put forward, to some extent, arguments for ‘religionless Christianity’, to use Bonhoeffer’s phrase. I take this to mean a dismantling of so much of the supernatural canopy and allow that Spirit of God to be set free. Dave Tomlinson speaks of this as ‘re-enchanting Christianity’, Robin Myers seeks to save Jesus from the Church, Gordon Lynch writes about the New Spirituality.

For these and many others the life and teachings of Jesus give us, as followers, a programme of radical discipleship, having the same passions to transform the lives of individuals and communities as prescribed in the Hebrew scriptures, with their macro themes of liberation, restoration and empowerment. In the first talk I noted their portrayal of Jesus as healer and mystic, subversive wisdom teacher, movement initiator, social prophet challenging the domination systems be they religious or/and political. This portrait of Jesus is housed in a theistic frame of understanding. Jesus is one filled with the Spirit, a mystical relationship to the God addressed as Abba. Jesus was a decisive revelation of that God, in as much as we can grasp what God would be like if God were human. A Jesus shaped Church would be one which takes seriously these brush strokes and therefore like Jesus confronts the powers of this world, of Empire, and seeks to change the world so that the Kingdom of God comes on earth as in heaven.

Simply by looking at the chapter headings in Myers’ book you see the drift of the argument and the shaping of this Church : Jesus the Teacher, not the Saviour; Faith as Being not Belief; Easter as Presence, not Proof; Christianity as Compassion, not Condemnation; Religion as Relationship, not Righteousness; Original Blessing not Original Sin.

These progressive writers and thinkers question the orthodox view of the divinity of Jesus as traditionally understood in the creeds of the Church. Portraying a Man of God is not the same as talking about THE Son of God, let alone God incarnate. Instead there is in part a degree Christology implying that we all may experience the power of the divine in our lives, we are all children of God but that Jesus had a particular, an enhanced experience of such Godly power. Jesus becomes not the exclusive pathway to God but a decisive revelation of God, leaving open the possibility of other revelations of the Divine Wisdom.

The Jesus then who shapes the Church is the One whom the synoptic gospels clearly portray as a charismatic Jewish healer, one who sought to live his life intensely in the

presence and power of the God, like many of the prophets before him. Jesus expected his followers also to live out lives in this faithful way, to be fully attentive to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who speaks, who acts, who will come in judgement.

Many Christians in recent decades have argued for the need to concentrate on a "lived Christianity", as Tomlinson calls it. The hymnwriter Sydney Carter wrote as such many decades ago– 'So shut the Bible up and show me how, the Christ you talk about is living now.' The 'lived presence of God' revealed in Jesus is to be 'relived' in the lives of churchgoers today.

My experience informs me that for many Christians, those who contribute to the life of their local church, who are its mainstays, there has been little opportunity or encouragement for this kind of debate and enquiry, little encouragement to reimagine church, to focus on a 'lived Christianity'. Remember what Jack Good said in his book *Honest Church*, that there is a kind of pact between minister and congregation, an agreement not to go off limits. Some clergy might feel that radical questioning is too dangerous a path to tread for fear of upsetting people and further diminishing the numbers who attend; other church leaders are convinced of the truth of the tradition, as 'handed down'. As for the congregation there is a strong case to be made that many people simply come to church to belong before even believing. My experience of being in different churches across Leeds and north Yorkshire Sunday by Sunday, is that if you pressed worshippers about what they really believed, a whole variety of answers would be given. But what energises people is the many organizational tasks to be done, from the church fete to the Christian aid collection, from the harvest festival arrangements to the Christmas nativity play, from sick visiting to Jubilee tea parties. And all of this is good and usually demands little in terms of asking the bigger questions of faith and belief. Some folk want to belong, no matter what they believe.

Brian Mountford in his book, *Christian Atheist*, illustrates the myriad of reasons why people attend his particular church through interviews he conducted with members of his congregation in Oxford. Some people describe themselves as atheists but come for an aesthetic reason, allowing music and art to shape their spirituality; some might be called Cranmer evensong atheists, luxuriating in the language of the old prayer book. Others find fulfillment in a host of good works, which do not require assent to certain doctrines and dogmas.

From what I have said, a Jesus shaped church then, would have the following characteristics:

1. A Jesus Shaped Church is Passionate about Justice, Compassion, Love and Healing

No one would doubt that the Jesus of history was driven by an intense desire to be faithful to the Law and the Prophets of his Jewish scriptures, to return to a pure and authentic obedience to Jahweh, to live out a life personally and communally in accordance with the highest ideals of his faith. Such a life would be full of compassion, as God is compassionate, full of righteous anger against all that diminishes the image of God in others. Above all a Love for God and for neighbour, as much as one loves oneself.

Such a church would, as many do, place central concerns upon deep and sustained care for all who come its way and reaching out to all in need.

2. A Jesus Shaped Church is Prophetic and Inclusive

Jesus not only seems to have been influenced by the Baptist but in his teachings and enacted parables seems to have broken down all kind of barriers – the divisions built around race and religion, status and honour, around gender and age. A church then shaped by Jesus would seek to include rather than exclude; a church which didn't follow conventions of status but rather exemplified the kingdom of nobodies. You only have to look at a procession in a great cathedral service – how clergy and others dress, the order in which they process to see a church embedded in hierarchy and status.

And this inclusive church will of necessity speak out on matters of injustice and all that disfigures our world today. Followers of Jesus will be in the vanguard and not the guards van when we address issues of peace and reconciliation, of ecology and environmental pollution. The Church has so often in its past and present led the way in social and political change – think of the nineteenth century opponents of slavery or of child labour. Think of examples of pioneering health and hospice care. But also recall how the Church can seem to drag its heels over other issues such as the place of women in its structures or the equality shown to gay and lesbian people. A Jesus Shaped Church would always seek to be the first to demand justice and equality for all people.

3. A Jesus Shaped Church is Holy and Mediates the Sacred

A Jesus shaped Church in honouring the teachings and example of Jesus would also need to acknowledge that for Jesus a Presence known to him as the God of the Torah was the bedrock of all he did, and said and who he was. We can see the miraculous birth stories as theology and not history, the nature miracles too as metaphorical narratives, many of the healings and exorcisms as belonging to a superstitious and pre scientific world. We can debate the nature of the Resurrection experience of the disciples and place the Ascension in the category of legend. But what of the Sacred, the holy, the 'More', the Presence, what of spirituality and prayer, of meditation and silence? In other words can people find 'God' and not the man up in the sky in a Jesus shaped church?

At a rather basic level, a church building be it empty or full, can offer to the community that rare privilege of silence, of wonder and awe, of a sense of otherness, of transcendence. Few will deny the power of silence at a place like Taize, when thousands of people keep silence together. Few will deny the influence on the human psyche which being in a great cathedral can invoke. In different church traditions – be it at a High Mass, a Quaker gathering or a charismatic rally, there is a powerful potential for a Church to mediate the Holy, the Sacred.

As human beings we need ways in which we are nourished, ways in which our whole being feels to have come alive to the person we are. The path of spiritual enlightenment, of mystical experience, that which Tillich wrote of as the 'Ground of All Being', that authentic experience of the sacred which is common to all great religious traditions will be part of a Jesus shaped church. It might take as its starting point the life of Jesus but will also be open to the spiritualities of the Age.

In such a Church prayer will be less the petitioning of an external deity, but an experience of the power of the Presence of God at work in the praying, yearning community.

4. A Jesus Shaped Church blesses all of life, is a blessing to the community.

A Jesus shaped Church would seek to be with people at the points in their lives when rituals of blessing, the sharing of joys and sorrows are so important. The 'hatched, matched and despatched' offices of the Church are still important for many people - the bringing a child for baptism, being married or holding a funeral service. Jack Spang

reminds us in his book *A New Christianity for a New World*, that the ecclesia of tomorrow will continue to hold ritual acts, which mark these transitions in human life. The ritual act of welcome and the symbolism of water remind us of the wonder bringing forth of new life but we need to shed ideas of original sin. Marriage offers the opportunity to enter deeply into the shared experiences of love and commitment and needs to be celebrated for any couple, whatever their gender. And a funeral service will unashamedly rejoice at the person's life and human worth, will engage deeply with the experience of loss and be honest about hope for the ultimate journey of the human soul rather than the dishonest certainties of a heaven and hell universe. All of this implies a community of people sharing in each others joys and sorrows.

5. A Jesus Shaped Church offers a thoughtful journey of questioning and discovering.

How can we ever know all there is to know about life and its purposes , about God and God's meaning and yet the Church has been so used to presenting a faith which seems all wrapped up with no need to question or doubt. But the Jesus I meet in the gospels is one who asks his followers to think, to laugh, to see irony, to be tested. Jesus spent three years taking risks, speaking out against the establishments of his day, choosing a less travelled path. I want a church to invite me on a journey of exploration. I don't want a Back to Church Sunday initiative. I want a come and journey with us Sunday. I want a church where we explore the Bible and ask How is this the Word of the Lord for us today?

My Sunday snapshot then of a Jesus shaped Church would reveal people of all ages and backgrounds gathering as community as did the early church, gathering to break bread, to remember the life and teachings of Jesus, to experience the presence of the sacred, to enter deeply into each others' lives, to commit themselves as a community and individuals to work for God's kingdom to come on earth. The scriptures are read and sometimes other readings. A time of reflection follows. The community sings hymns and songs where the story of Jesus and the life of the world connect. A time of silence allows for the individual's private space and yearnings. A time of prayerful attention to the needs of individuals, the community and world is expressed in imaginative and compelling ways. After the sacred time there is a communal meal and money is collected for various causes.

I don't know if my Church of England will ever be like this. Some churches are or are trying to be so. I was a member of one such church for 20 years. Marcus Borg remarked to my successor the last time he spoke at St Marks' – I wonder how long it takes to create a community like this?

QUESTIONS

- 1. What do you think are the main obstacles to creating a Jesus shaped church and what steps might be taken to begin that change?**
- 2. What characteristics of a Jesus shaped church would be the most attractive to you and why?**