

## Ash Wednesday 2011

Psalm 51, Joel 2 vv 1-17 p912, Matthew 6 vv 1-21 p970

These are challenging times for the Church of God. Shabaz Bhatti, a Christian minister in the government in Pakistan, was murdered last Wednesday for standing up for the rights of religious believers. We ought to remember that Christians in other countries still face persecution and even martyrdom for our faith. This is particularly true in the Middle East at the present because long-established indigenous Christian Churches bear the brunt of their compatriots' resentment at what they believe to be the unwarranted interference of the supposedly Christian West in the affairs of Moslem nations. But Christians are persecuted in many places – wherever there are totalitarian governments which fear the expression of ideologies other than their own. This is true, for example, in China, Burma, North Korea and, ironically, in Zimbabwe - ironically because President Robert Mugabe claims to be a Christian. He sat next to Prince Charles at the funeral of Pope John Paul II.

Yet the persecuted Church is often the healthy Church. Persecuted churches are firm in their faith. They grow. They resist persecution by loving their enemies and praying for their persecutors and they grow both in the quality of their Christian life and in their numbers.

Whereas in this country we have completely different problems. The Church is becoming marginalised. Twice lately – once in the case of a bed and breakfast hotel, once in the case of a willingness to become foster parents – Christian people have effectively been told by the courts that the teachings of their religion are irrelevant. The assumption is that we live in a secular society. Religion is something we are free to practise in private, but it must be allowed, it seems, to have no bearing on the way our affairs are conducted in the public domain.

As the state takes more and more control of the way we all live (admittedly for what it believes to be good reasons), it becomes harder and harder to offer anything distinctive, whether we are a Church, a charity or an interest group. Some people are quite worried that, under some pressure from government, the Church of England is adopting terms and conditions for its clergy more like those of secular employment than those implied by a vocation to sacred ministry. I refer in particular to the Clergy Discipline Measure and Common Tenure.

It is probably still true that the majority of people in this country continue to call themselves Christians, but most of them curiously seem to see little need to belong to the Church. The result is, in contrast to the Church in countries where she is persecuted, that our Church in England sometimes feels like she is dying.

Among those of us who are committed to the Church, there seems to be an inability to come to a common mind. There are actually three possible answers to the questions should Christian hoteliers be allowed to reserve double beds for married heterosexual couples and should Christian foster parents be compelled to tell their charges that homosexual lifestyles are as acceptable morally as heterosexual life styles?

1. You can believe that homosexual practices are always sinful and that Christians not only have a right but also a duty to discourage them.
2. You can believe that practising homosexuals have the same rights as married couples and that no-one therefore should be allowed to discriminate against them.
3. You can believe that practising homosexuals have their own rights and that people who believe homosexuality to be wrong also have their own rights and that the beliefs of both ought to be respected equally.

There are bodies of people within the Church (as in the world outside the Church) who hold all three of these views and there is a danger that, far from coming to a common mind, or even respecting our differences, the Church of England and the Anglican Communion could split on the issue of homosexuality, as we could split on the issue of women bishops. Indeed some people have already left the Church of England and joined the Roman Catholic Church. Differences on these two issues – homosexuality and the ordination of women – reflect deeper differences within the Church on questions of authority. Does the Bible reveal God's Will? Does God make Himself known through the ongoing but centuries old tradition of the Church? Do we discern God's Will in and through our contemporary culture? The Church of England has always answered *Yes* to all three: Scripture, Tradition and Reason – a threefold cord which is not easily broken. But in what proportion do we weigh these three ingredients as we seek a recipe capable of sustaining us with unity, integrity and authenticity? Must we obey the Bible as it stands? Or do we read the Bible as part of a wider tradition – the faith and order of God's Church all over the world and through two millennia? Or must we interpret both Scripture and Church Tradition in the light of humanity's current understanding of itself and of God? We can't agree and we don't seem to love God sufficiently to love one another whatever our differences.

We seem to inhabit a marginalised Church, a declining Church and a divided Church. So what do we do about it? Where do we start? We might despair if we didn't know God. But we do know God. He promised that the gates of Hell would not prevail against His Church. We can trust God. So what do we do about it? Where do we start?

Well there is only one place we can start. It is a very appropriate place for the beginning of Lent. We can only start with ourselves. And what can we do? We can pray. We might start by telling God what the problems are. Look at this parish. The big looming problem at the moment for some of us is *Who is going to be our next parish treasurer?* More generally, we face a financial crisis. Our income is considerably less than our liabilities and we have no reserves in our general fund. We are too few in number. We don't seem to be very good at sharing the faith with our neighbours. Tell God what the problems are. It won't hurt Him. He knows. Tell Him what's wrong with the Church of England and indeed what's wrong with the Church in general. Telling God isn't telling Him what He doesn't know already, but it might help us to clarify our own ideas about things and prayer does change things!

Once we've told God what's wrong with the Church, it shouldn't be too hard to tell Him what's wrong with other people. They don't put enough in the collection plate. They won't volunteer for the jobs that need doing. They don't come to Church when they've got something else on. They don't support our social and fund-raising events. People don't

share their faith with others. They don't send their children to Sunday School. They're not good citizens. They don't support community initiatives. They gossip. They don't take care of unpopular people in distress. The government and the council impose too many regulations. The Diocese imposes too high a quota. It's not too difficult to tell God what's wrong with other people. He knows anyway. When we've had a good moan about them, we might even think of praying for them. Prayer changes people.

You can see where this is going. There is only one place to start and Lent is a good place to start. In the light of our prayers for the Church and the world we can examine ourselves. How much do I love God? As much as Shabaz Bhatti does? How much do I love my fellow Christians? As much as Jesus loves me? How much do I truly love my neighbour? It starts to get very uncomfortable when we examine ourselves in the light of our prayers for the Church and for the world, because, if we sincerely want what God wants for His Church, if we sincerely long for a world in which there is peace and justice and mercy, we have to ask ourselves what is our part in God's plan? Thinking like this leads us to what I believe is called radical repentance, repentance at the very root of our being. Pray for the Church and the world. Pray for other people. Pray openly to God and let Him reveal to you the person He really wants you to be. Let Him reveal to you how He wants you to use your time and your talents, your money and all the rich resources with which He has blessed you.

Many of us have grown a carapace, a transparent carapace. We can see the truth of the Gospel, but it can't touch us. We've said these words so often. We've sung these hymns. We've read these Bible stories. We know them so well in our heads, but do they touch our hearts? *We offer you our souls and bodies, to be a living sacrifice. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.* If that transparent carapace is dissolved in the tears of repentance, there is a tremendous vulnerability first of all to despair because we recognise just how inadequate we are. But we ought not to despair. Christ's cross is *a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.* We have fallen a very long way but the reach of God's love is infinitely longer. In our penitence, we are restored to our rightful place as His children. We ought not to despair, but we do remain vulnerable once the carapace has been dissolved away; we remain vulnerable with Christ to the desperate needs of the Church and the world. In that vulnerability *we offer* with Him *our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.* In Him we are set free – free from the demands of the world such as power, position and material prosperity, to meet the needs of the world, its need for love and faith and hope, its need for God.

I don't know what the future is for myself, for this Church here in Cuxton and Halling, for the Church in England or for the world, but I do know that the future is in the Hands of God and that, if I am to take my place in that future, I have to place myself in the Hands of God, to repent and to believe. And that's what you have to do and what we all have to do. And this Lent is as good a time as any to take our next step or even our first step on the road that leads to life, to repent and to believe.