

Christmas 2008

Isaiah 9 vv 2-7 p693, Titus2 vv 11-14 p1199, Luke 2 vv 1-20 p1027

I had a rather sad experience last week. We were just going into the Junior School to see their Christmas production, when a little boy from the Infant School said to me, *My brother doesn't believe in Jesus and God.* That struck me as quite tragic. A little child says he doesn't believe in Jesus and God. Then a little girl told me that her brother didn't believe either. So I made a bit of joke of it and asked whether they still celebrated Christmas? After all, it would seem strange to celebrate the birthday of someone you didn't believe in. The children assured me that their brothers did celebrate Christmas. For the presents, I guess, but, really, if you take the true meaning out of Christmas, what is left?

Ironically – and you will know this if you saw it – this year's Junior School play was about the true meaning of Christmas. Two travellers in time and space (Dr When and Dr What) are trying to find out what Christmas is really all about. It turns out that it is not at the Christmas party, the cracker factory or even the turkey farm. To find out what Christmas is really all about, they have to go to Bethlehem.

Last Friday's *Times*, funnily enough, contained an article by Joan Bakewell telling us to tell our children Bible stories. She does not believe in God herself, but believes that children are seriously deprived if they do not know these wonderful stories from the Old and New Testaments which have done so much to frame our world. Ms Bakewell speaks of this as *the first generation of secular parents, those who have made a deliberate choice not to bring up their children within any faith.* *(They) have dropped the Bible stories along with everything else. Sunday schools are not part of many people's lives any more, and religion within the school curriculum covers a whole swath of other faiths and deals in worthy but unexciting concepts.*

That is a good point and a chilling one. *This is the first generation of secular parents, those who have made a deliberate choice not to bring up their children within any faith.* If you think about it, all over the world and for most of human history, each generation has regarded it as of the utmost importance to pass on its beliefs and values to its children. In Christian Britain, children were baptized as babies, prayed with every day, taught to pray themselves, had Bible stories read to them, said grace before and after meals, were sent to Sunday School and were brought to church by their parents at least on major occasions like Christmas. Then the post, post-War generation started to allow things to drift. Mostly it wasn't that they stopped believing. Very few people who believe in God take a conscious decision not to believe any more. They just let things drift. For any of a hundred reasons, they take less part in church life. They stop coming themselves or come only infrequently. They stop sending their children to Sunday School. Baptisms get put off or don't happen at all. Prayers and graces are not said openly in the home. The Bible stories are no longer told. Sunday becomes a day for shopping, sport, leisure activities and even work. Once most people are living like that, the whole of society functions on the assumption that you will be available to play for your team Sunday morning or work an extra shift or go out for the day with the family. Once most people are living like that, you are regarded as slightly odd if you turn down Sunday overtime, if you refuse to buy anything on a Sunday, if you won't

allow your boys to play in a Sunday football league or if you insist on going to church before you all go off to the seaside. My point is that the generation who allowed things to drift in this way were not generally trying to destroy faith. On the contrary, they just assumed that faith would survive. They did not see that faith needs nurturing. At the very least, they wanted their children to have the opportunity to believe. They just did not see the necessity to attend church, to take them to Sunday School, to tell them the Bible stories or to pray with them. It was assumed that they would somehow encounter the Christian religion – maybe at school – and would have the chance to decide for themselves. That was the generation of maybe forty years ago. It doesn't seem to have worked, this laid back strategy. I am afraid that this is my generation, the people who were parents in the 1970s and 80s. It is their children who are *the first generation of secular parents, those who have made a deliberate choice not to bring up their children within any faith*. As a result, the grandchildren of my generation are much less likely to be baptized than any generation for more than a thousand years. That bothers me too – to see all these unbaptized children running around the village. This generation does not know the basics of the Christian faith. They have been brought up in an atmosphere in which all faith is vaguely disparaged as – at best an emotional crutch for the feeble-minded and at worst a fanatical fundamentalism, which oppresses the human spirit and inspires its dupes to murder and martyrdom. They do not know how to pray. They do not know what the Bible teaches. They have no morality rooted in anything deeper than human convention. They have no real concept of what it means to be human, believing us to be merely the latest stage in the process of evolution, a superior kind of ape, the blind product of chance mutation and the survival of the fittest.

A little child says that he does not believe in God or Jesus. Doesn't that strike you as tragic? Or doesn't it matter? And, if it does matter, who is to blame? You could blame the parents or teachers or society in general. To some extent, you can blame the Church. We have all failed. If we have faith and faith matters and a whole generation is growing up without faith, then we have failed and failed badly. If those of us who have faith are unable or unwilling to pass on the faith to the next generation, then who will? I don't want to go into the details of why we fail to pass on our faith to young people. We could be up all night discussing how much more difficult it is to teach Christianity in a multicultural society or whether young people are more likely to be turned on or turned off by trendy vicars and "relevant" worship styles or how far we should adapt our pattern of church life to accommodate the post-modern world. What I will say, however, is this. It is my belief that one of the main reasons my generation has failed to pass on our faith to our children and grandchildren is that we have failed to take our own faith with sufficient seriousness. What is there about you and me and the way we live our lives that would make other people think that our faith in God matters to us more than anything else? If we want our children to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, with all their souls, with all their minds and with all their strength, and to love their neighbours as themselves, then surely we need to show them by our own lives what it means at least to try, with the help of God, to live by those standards.

But never mind, for now, the *how* of passing on the faith, why does it matter? Why is it tragic when a little child says that he does not believe in God or Jesus? First of all, if the Christmas story is true, people ought to believe it. Generally speaking, if things are true, they ought to be believed and, if they are not true, people ought not to believe them. So, if

the Christmas story is true, we should be sharing that truth with other people. If the Christmas story is not true, why are we here? Why are we here in any sense? Obviously and trivially, there would be no point in taking part in the Christmas Mass if the Son of God had not been born into our world, if He had not died for our salvation, if He were not present with us here and now, risen from the tomb, and if we did not expect to meet Him when He comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead. If the Christian story is untrue, then there is no point at all in Church, but, if it is true, (in the words of Isaac Watts) *love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Furthermore and more profoundly still, if the Christmas story is not true, why are we here at all, not just why are we here in church on this special night, but why are we here at all? Why do we exist? Faith in God gives the best account there is as to why human beings, why the world, why the universe, what are we here for, what is our purpose, how are we meant to live, what will we come to? God is the meaning of existence and God makes Himself known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Religion is not the icing on life's cake, the optional extra that makes everyday life look better and taste sweeter; faith in God is the very essence of life, the whole of life – the work, rest and play of life, definitely not just the prayer, public worship and bible-reading bits of life, the bits that get neglected and forgotten when we are under pressure, but all of life.

The child growing up unbaptized and without faith does not have the resources to meet life's demands. He does not really know he is, why he matters or what his responsibilities are – to himself, to other people, to the world in general and to God. He does not experience the power of prayer. He does not have the experience of knowing God as His heavenly Father or Jesus as his personal Saviour or the Holy Spirit as his constant companion. He does not know what it means to belong to a community of believers. He may not know the love of a family; the family does not long survive the dissolution of faith in society at large. The unbeliever is a very lonely person. We are told that many of these teenage boys join gangs because they know no other community. They have never known or they have rejected the Church family. Their biological families are in chaos because people no longer even attempt to live up to the Christian ideal of life-long heterosexual marriage, taking responsibility for children, elderly parents and other kin. They do not feel that they belong to the general British community which may seem quite alien to young people brought up on housing estates cut off like ghettos from the wider world and yet lacking the community spirit which characterised and gave coherence to traditional ghettos. St Augustine of Hippo was a very worldly young man, who lived 1600 years ago. One of his famous sayings is the prayer *Give me chastity and continence – but not yet!* He enjoyed the sort of life style which is taken for granted by many young men today. But Augustine also prayed, much more wisely, in the words *Our Heart is Restless Until it rests in You.* We can only find rest in God. We are not fulfilled unless we know God. If we do not know God, the most important thing is missing; our lives are an empty shell. And that is one reason why it is tragic when a little child boasts that he does not believe in Jesus or God.

Here is another. Conduct. Why do people behave as they do? How we treat other people depends on what we think of other people. Do we respect them? Do we think they are as important as we are? Do we love our neighbours as ourselves? We worry about the way the

world seems to be fragmenting – crime, war, continual challenges to traditional morality, the constant attrition of values. Justice originates with God. When we reject God, we lose our grip on the concepts of right and wrong. You cannot believe in the brotherhood of man unless you acknowledge the fatherhood of God. The moral chaos all around is a result of our society's rejection of God. If you want this world to be a better place, you need to share a vision of God with the coming generations.

There is more to it than that, however; it is not merely that people behave better if they know, for example, the Ten Commandments, not even if they fear the consequences of breaking them. Respect for others has its roots in a proper self-respect. You can only love your neighbour as yourself if you can love yourself. A great deal of the crime perpetrated in society (perhaps all of it) is committed because people lack a sense of their own worth. They do not have a proper self respect. And what is a human being worth? He's not worth what he boasts about, nor even what he has achieved. A human being is of infinite value because he is made in the image of God and Christ died for him. It is only if we know that we matter that much to the Maker of the Universe that we have a proper sense of our own worth and can treat other people accordingly. So that is another reason why it is a tragedy when a child or a young person denies God. In denying God, he is denying his own worth and therefore his opportunity to contribute as a member of the human family.

Here is my third and last reason why it is tragic when anyone rejects God. Our relationship with God determines our eternal destiny. I do not believe in a vengeful God, delighting to send people to Hell for any slight slip up. That is not the biblical picture. The biblical picture is, however, that eternal life is knowing God. I am sure that God gives us every chance to know Him. I know that He is ready to forgive all our failures if we ask Him in penitence and faith. I know that God does not desire the death of a sinner. But I am also sure that He gives us a choice and respects our right to choose. God promises eternal life to everyone who accepts Jesus into his heart. We are judged according to whether we have been good people or bad people. There are indications that those who have never known about Jesus will be judged in accordance with their consciences and what they have made of the resources which God gives to every human being. But the awful prospect remains, that a human being may, if he or she is so determined, choose to reject God eternally and that God will honour that choice and the eternal rejection of God is too terrible to contemplate for any human being. So anything we can do to bring others to the knowledge of God is something that we must not fail to attempt.

Tonight we celebrate the Birth of Jesus and, over the next few months, the Church's year will recapitulate and celebrate the major events of His Life on earth and eventually we shall come to the Easter story of His Offering of Himself on the Cross for the sins of the whole world, His Resurrection from the Dead and His Ascension into Heaven. The Ascension is depicted there in our east window, which you can't see now because it's too dark. Just before His Ascension, He instructed those who believe in Him: *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.* We ought not to be able to rest while there are people who have never been given the opportunity to know Him as Lord and God.