

Sermon 25th February 2018 -though I'm not very religious

I suppose I first got involved in the Church of England as a curious combination of several things. At about the age of fourteen in what have been a unique example I found as a result of my school assemblies at Colchester Royal Grammar School, which were dry to the point of desiccation, consisting of a Bible reading, a prayer and a hymn, that I was strangely drawn to organised religion. I recognised myself as an Anglican and probably a Christian. At this point I ran into a problem. Though my mother had been and indeed is now a churchgoer, my late father was bitterly opposed to all religion. A sign of interest in it on my part was met with anger and condemnation. One may say that joining the Church of England was an act of teenage rebellion on my part.

In the meantime, though, I needed to find out more. My school was not strong, to say the least, on religious studies, but lurking on a shelf in the library was a book by one Dr Bicknell, 'A theological introduction to the 39 articles of the Church of England', originally produced to get candidates for the ministry through the ordination exams. It was way over my head, but again something in it caught my imagination. Here was something worked out and worked through, an attempt to join the bible much beloved of the school Christian Union to centuries of thought and reflection cashed out in a Christian community.

One of my closest friends was a churchgoer, and I used occasionally to be able to sneak off and worship with him in a small church band in which I played the tenor sax, for we all have our guilty secrets. I had made a mental note to seek to be confirmed, for I had been christened as a baby, once I went off to university and no longer under the paternal gaze.

But although, as I hope you can appreciate from this brief account, a lot was going on in my head, I couldn't really claim to much religious experience. That is to say, if one means a sense of the presence of God and his hand in my life. I prayed for it, I gave my life to Jesus, as the custom is, but for me there was no warm sense of assurance, of being saved, of dependency on a higher power. This troubled me, but despite this I carried on. There seemed to be something worthwhile there, dimly grasped, but real.

On my first Sunday at Selwyn College in Cambridge, in October 1987, I attended the chapel service and then told the chaplain, who was also new, that I wanted to be confirmed. 'Blimey, that was quick' was his reply, but he supported me and I came to confirmation in the chapel in May 1988. I can vividly recall as I sat in the chapel, which I attended daily, a sense of a voice in my head saying insistently 'If you had any integrity you would get up and leave this chapel for you do not believe any of it. It is only fear of embarrassment that is keeping you here'. Something

kept me there – probably embarrassment -, because I was confirmed that evening.

My life, and particularly my spiritual life, was marked out to be one of ‘despites’, ‘notwithstandings’, ‘althoughs’ and after a while I could see something of a pattern of self doubt tempered by obstinacy. Falling in love, for example, coming to the conclusion that I should propose marriage, these too were not straightforward, not marked by flashes of illumination or a strong sense of the way forward. Nonetheless, I seem to have ended up with a wife somehow, after a couple of romantic relationships came to naught. And getting ordained was similarly complicated. My college chaplain had encouraged me to consider this, and so I went off for a year after my degree through a contact to the Solomon Islands where I taught novices in an Anglican monastery. While I was there I had another of these ‘you don’t believe any of it experiences’, which was unnerving, but, as before, passed away. I have learned to distrust my strong emotions.

On my return to England in 1992 I went through the selection procedures of the Church for ordination, and was turned down on the grounds of my personal inadequacies. You may find me a little odd now, but 25 years ago I was even more so, before the moderating effects of holding down a job and getting married. After four years working as a solicitor’s clerk in an ecclesiastical firm, serving on a PCC of a crumbling central London church as

treasurer and renewing the conversation about ordination in the diocese of London I went back to a selection conference.

Surely, Jonathan, you must have felt the presence of God at this point, otherwise why go through it all? I hear you cry. And the answer comes – not especially. Commitment is more important to me than passion, and in the commitment, even the bloody mindedness of it all, I found the shape of my life. I don’t want to overstate the case. Mine is not a bleak life, devoid of cheerfulness and purpose, far from it. Even at its most difficult I have always found something to be amused by. God has given me a cheerful heart, and for that I am grateful, and I have never been without comfort and support from those around me.

But to return to the story. I went to another selection conference in 1996, and whether because standards had slipped or for some other reason the selectors let me through – but reluctantly, as I had to undertake a pre theological training course to train and iron out the inadequacies already remarked upon. During this I had the opportunity to begin psychotherapy, which I continued on and off for some five years, under the guidance of a priest therapist called Eric Hutchison. This was profoundly helpful in all sorts of ways, but one way it was spiritually valuable was in an image Eric gave me to understand something of what was going on inside me. He suggested I should see myself as rather like a committee, with myself, my ego, in the chair, and with voices around the table speaking for

the different experiences, people, fears, hopes, desires and so on I had incorporated over the years. The chair's job is to hear the members of the committee, to prevent any one voice from dominating, and to find a way forward without being compromised by negativity and fear. But the Christian knows that at the other end of the table, silent but supportive, is the figure of the soul, the presence of God, who steps in only when the need is direst and only for the minimum time.

This is to put a complex idea rather crudely, but it helped me make sense of the cacophony and complex of voices that often drowned out the still small voice of calm, the whisper of a whisper that comes from God, and helped me become less abrasive, cutting and awkward. It also gave me a soft spot for that old chestnut, 'Footsteps'.

And I found, somewhat to my relief, that the ministry of the Church of England, actually rather suits someone like myself. Most people don't go to church, but that certainly doesn't mean that God is not interested in them and or that they are not interested in God. The enigmatic, the allusive, the 'I'm not sure what it means but I think it's important' is a vital part of our ministry as the national church and I have loved being part of that, in the rhythms of prayer and scripture, the sense of taking a long view in which it is only in the perspective of eternity that our lives show their meaning and purpose, and to which the

traditions which are the accumulated wisdom of the centuries bear witness.

I am not someone who reads much poetry, respect though I do those who write it. Some of it, though, I have found expresses what I am getting at better than I can, and in particular there is a Welsh poet called R S Thomas who speaks to my present condition. Here are a few lines from his poem, Pilgrimages, in which he makes a pilgrimage to a chapel on an island.

Am I too late?
 Were they too late also, those
 First pilgrims? He is such a fast
 God, always before us and leaving as we arrive.

It is I who ask,
 Was the pilgrimage I made to come to my own self, to learn that
 in times like these and for one like me God will never be plain
 and out there, but dark rather and inexplicable, as though he
 were in here?

Amen to that. Thanks be to God.