

Dynamic Divinity

Clergy Conference Address – September 2009

The day on which I began to think about these reflections was auspicious. Although I have regular engagement with the media, it is not usually manic. The third week in July was different! In just one afternoon, we were assailed on all sides with four quite different topics. It began with Swine Flu, but the media attention itself became infectious. It spread to lap dancing alongside the Bull Ring in Wakefield. It mutated to sham weddings between Nigerians and Slovaks in Cleckhecksmondsedge. It reached pandemic proportions over the issue of whether we should encourage couples to marry and allow their offspring to be baptised in the same service.

Interestingly enough each of these was in a way about the subtleties of change. *Swine Flu* pivoted on whether we should stop passing the peace and sharing the common cup. *Lap Dancing* was about town planning and cultural change in our own See City. *Sham Marriages* was about the changes already experienced and possibly multiplying through the handling of asylum seekers. *Marriage and Baptism in one rite* was about how we should respond to profound demographic, sociological and moral changes and developments within our society. You might feel the same as one of our doughty lay General Synod members who was heard to exclaim recently: ‘Change – aren’t things bad enough already?’

That said, this final conundrum about marriage and baptism takes us fairly directly into questions about *theology and change*. Why were the media so interested? Put simply it appeared that the Church, that bastion of tradition and moral conservatism, appeared to be condoning what the newspapers described as *living in sin!* Were we not abandoning the teaching of two millennia?’ ‘Surely the Bible makes it clear that sex before marriage is wrong?’ asked the ITN reporter as I was interviewed (not by accident!) against the backdrop of both the House of Lords and Westminster Abbey. Of course, as I pointed out to them, it’s not quite as simple as that. You would be hard pressed to identify any passage in the Old and the New Testament which explicitly forbids sex before marriage that would be directly applicable to how we see marriage today without some qualification. Indeed there are a number of passages and narratives which seem to describe (if not applaud) sexual mores that we might find highly dubious.

So what about scripture and tradition, then, in all this? Instead of condemnation, for example, Jesus is accepting of tax collectors and sinners, prostitutes and compromised individuals. They are welcomed into the kingdom; the challenge follows. In the Middle Ages and later still, the practice of betrothal was widespread. People were betrothed to each other, lived together and then married in due course. The pattern of marriage and family life that we take for granted is relatively modern. Radical changes in personal relationships have thrown this once again into the air. If we are accepting of couples asking for marriage after lengthy cohabitation, are we shifting our moral ground, are we compromising ethical stances which are rooted in our theological and doctrinal title-deeds? Are we assuming that God’s will for us has shifted and that there are changes in God’s essential nature too? This single controversy can take us immediately to the heart of profound theological questions. If God changes then what *can* religion offer? Even Christian faith, seen as the essence of that which is reliable and unchanging, appears to be built on shaky or shifting foundations.

*

*

*

The questions raised here are not peripheral to our faith but foundational to it. During this conference we have engaged with the question of *God and Change* from two different directions already. From a sociological point of view, Grace Davie has shown how shifts within different societies throughout the world have had a direct impact on the practice and implications of Christian belief; in what sense have these changes made Europe the ‘exceptional case’? Will ‘vicarious belief’ continue to support a healthy and continuing Christian church in our contemporary culture? James Burnell-Nugent has addressed the ways in which leaders in organisations need to be able to respond, to have vision, to communicate and

innovate within contemporary world which is rapidly changing. The *Investing in Our Faith* initiative alongside the concurrent *Deanery Transformational Planning* also addresses key issues about *God and Change*. This is all of direct significance to us, but it remains simply a diagnosis of the symptoms or a tampering with techniques if we do not reach down to the theological foundations which underpin our faith.

The theological questions raised here are not new. They have been there since Christianity emerged out of late antique culture. Nevertheless they are questions which have become more pressing since the nineteenth century. The book which is often seen as the classical exploration of these issues is John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, published in 1845. It is a book full of ironies. Intended to indicate how the doctrines of the Church of England are consonant with those of Patristic Christianity, it presaged Newman's reception into the Roman Catholic Church in the very same year that the book was published. Moreover, written with a deliberately *conservative* aim, it would open up questions about change within Christian belief in a manner which had not been openly debated at the time. In some ways, despite its conservative intent, it was radical in its implications, a child of its time.

Indeed, it is no accident that it was published when it was, for theories of change, development and revolution were in the air. Only three years later, Karl Marx published *The Communist Manifesto*. This coincided with other seismic shifts. For, indeed, 1848 was the so-called 'Year of Revolutions' in Europe, with régimes being toppled and the Chartists in England making their most impressive show of strength before the movement later collapsed in some ignominy.

Only fourteen years after Newman's book was published, Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* appeared, that is, in 1859. Now, almost notoriously, we know that Darwin was not *alone* in working on a theory of evolution! For, at exactly the same time Alfred Russell Wallace had developed a similar theory and some have even suspected Darwin of operating in a way that deliberately pipped Russell to the post. Herbert Spencer's writings on progress came out of the same period as indeed did the early writings on source criticism of the Bible by Julius Wellhausen and others (I'm sure you'll all remember your JEDP never mind your ABC!). Revolution and change were in the air and it had its impact upon people's confidence in their faith. The oft-quoted poem *Dover Beach* by Matthew Arnold has even become the motto and title for a radical Christian group in our own day, the *Sea of Faith* movement. Arnold's poem contains the passage:

'The Sea of Faith
Was once, too at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.'

Now, it is both naïve and inaccurate to see Arnold as a sort of pre-Cupittian figure emerging out of the shadows of Victorian unbelief to proclaim a liberated and liberating secularism. It is important to remember that Arnold saw himself first and foremost as a poet, even though he earned his crust throughout his life as a School Inspector! It seems as if Arnold himself retained at least a toehold on belief, if not rather more. His poem instead captures the mood of the times, times which undoubtedly displayed an increasing sense of uncertainty and change in almost every aspect of life both intellectual and practical. The final stanza of *Dover Beach* captures it perfectly:

'Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.'

Of course, one of the ironies, of Newman's *Essay on Development* - at which I have already hinted - was that the intention behind it was almost the diametric opposite to the atmosphere described by Matthew Arnold. Newman was seeking certitude and stability anchored in the ancient verities provided by scripture and the early church.

The development which Newman describes is that of a 'flower unfolding.' It is the development of a truth which has been there - unchanging in its essence from the beginning - but which can manifest itself differently in different ages. In order to secure this abiding tent or tabernacle of doctrinal purity, Newman produces guy ropes which will anchor it firmly; he provides a series of tests of development.

It is here, in fact, where Newman's work has been most clearly open to criticism. Why *these* tests? If doctrine manifests itself differently in different ages, how *can* we know securely that such doctrine is not itself changing? It was this realisation that brings us back to the irony of Newman being seen now, more than a century after his death, as one of the most radical theological voices of the nineteenth century. No wonder that many are hesitant of him being beatified, let alone canonised. For the philosophical/theological *entail* of the questions about the tests he offers is a theory of doctrinal *evolution* rather than development. To develop further the biological analogy, the substrate may remain the same, indeed it must do so, but the process of mutation, so to speak, may be entirely different, and even at times hard to recognise as having the same source, let alone shape, in subsequent generations.

This theme has been well explored by Vincent Donovan in his classic *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*. Donovan argues, as a missionary himself, that the task of the Christian educator/evangelist/missionary is to tell the narrative of the gospel and then let the ambient culture respond to it and clothe it in their own words, concepts and stories. This does leave one with a feeling of theological vertigo. Where might it all go? How can we be sure that it produces a mutation which is true to the life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus? Part of the answer is that we do (in the form of scripture and tradition) have the substrate with which to compare it. If all family likeness is lost then how can it be part of the same gospel narrative? We might take as an example of a development which has failed the test in some parts of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa from the 1960s onwards - where *apartheid* was supported and justified using the Gospel as a source and authority. This is clearly 'sub-Christian'. Elsewhere one might argue that certain strands of liberation theology and 'public theology' are positive developments. The renewed use of the *exodus* theme directs some of those theological developments.

*

*

*

So far we have only explored one level of the implications of change with which we began. We have seen that doctrine does develop or indeed, more radically, it appears to evolve. This presses us back one stage further, as I hinted at the start, to the nature of God. If our perception of God, of the things of God, and of God's relationship to the contingent - that is to the creation - can mutate, then does that not imply that God's own essence must also be mutating? Now there has been a noble tradition coming down through the ages of a real reluctance or humility in defining the nature of the Godhead. Thomas Aquinas was always keen to stress the analogical nature of human language about God. On his deathbed he is said to have reflected, referring to his own monumental output, 'I count all this as so much straw.' For this reason we need to be careful about how much we try to say about the nature of

being in God. Nevertheless, we do speak of our God as a personal God and we do believe, because our faith is incarnational, that God is in some way intimately concerned for and involved with creation, and notably with humankind.

There has been a tendency to talk of an absolute *impassibility* of God. In other words, God cannot suffer since suffering in itself implies a real change in our essence. We all see the suffering of others and we are changed by it. Just a couple of months ago I read John Boyne's short novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. It is the story of a nine year old child - told by the child himself - of his and his family's move from Berlin to the countryside of Poland. His father turns out to be the newly appointed commandant of Auschwitz. The young lad strikes up a friendship with a Jewish lad of the same age who lives on the other side of the wire fence, *the boy in the striped pyjamas*. I shall not tell you more of the story – do read it. It is full of pathos. It is both moving and harrowing. It raises questions that none of us dare shelve or ignore. It reminded me too of the reflections of another Jew looking back to his childhood as a survivor of Auschwitz.

I am thinking this time of the Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel. In his autobiographical reflection *Night*, he includes this most powerful and dramatic passage:

‘One day when we came back from work, we saw three gallows, for two men and a young lad, rearing up in the assembly place The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter The three victims mounted together on to the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

‘Long live liberty!’ cried the two adults.
But the child was silent
‘Where is God? Where is He?’ someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.
Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon the sun was setting.
‘Bare your heads!’ yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous.
We were weeping.
‘Cover your heads!’

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light the child was still alive....
For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes.....

Behind me I heard the same man asking:
“Where is God now?”
And I heard a voice within me answer him:
“Where is He? Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows.....”

Now, we may not describe things theologically quite as Wiesel does. He is, of course, speaking out of a Jewish theological inheritance. But the incarnation does imply something not just about Jesus, but about God's spirit in every one of us and of God's involvement with us and our world. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, *Woodbine Willie* of the Great War, was also something of an ‘amateur poet.’ His collection *The Unutterable Beauty* contains some not dissimilar reflections on God and suffering, but this time relating to his experiences in the trenches and specifically in relation to Jesus' death and passion.

In *High and Lifted Up*, Studdert Kennedy wrote:

Church as a public sacred space where there can be dialogue and interaction with the wider world, but also where the Church as the *new creation*, to use Paul's words, effects God's own transformative power. Where does this leave us, then, with our theme of *God and Change*, which these reflections have sought to address theologically? We have seen that our belief is shaped by the *substrate* of our faith, that is by the *mystery* which is the life and ministry, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. We have seen too that Christian faith is also ineluctably shaped by the world, by the culture in which each generation has found itself set. The 'patterning power of the kingdom' results from the engagement of these two. Herein doctrine evolves. And this is not something abstract and general. We find ourselves in this diocese shaped by local culture – cultures even – but we also play a profound part in shaping that culture.

Moreover, in a very profound sense, as we have seen, our theme has led us to see that essential to the Christian life is being taken further into a participation in Christ. This is definitive of the nature of the Church. What might this say of that media-crazy afternoon in late July in our diocese, and what might some further reflection upon that say to us in our ministry and to the Church of God in our part of Yorkshire?

The church is about participation in Christ. It is therefore also about participation in God's creation and redemption of all that is, and of all that falls short. This, then, takes us back to the divine transformation issuing from the heart of God and its overflowing through humanity into all that is. These four themes with which the media engaged interestingly takes us a good way into the changing, transformative power of God within the life of our diocese.

What is so objectionable about a lap dancing club at the heart of Wakefield's Bull Ring? It is something about the respect that God calls out of us in relation to the body, to our nature as sexual beings and to the true depth of human relationship. The theme of the 'body and society' is one which has engaged the church since earliest times and rightly so. Indeed, the church should be heard speaking about morality - literally in this case - in the 'public square'. For failure to honour the body will mis-shape our common civil appreciation of all our corporate life. Our participation in God implies a *change* in attitude to our common life – and *our* common life is bodily. We are the body of Christ in this place.

So, then, almost directly to issues of marriage and human society. Why encourage marriage in Church, within the Christian tradition? After all marriage is a natural sacrament rooted in a covenant, a mutual giving between two people, it is not something Christianity exercises a monopoly over. But language of covenant is resonant throughout the entire Judeo-Christian tradition; the Old Testament echoes at least four different covenants. Christianity in its biblical roots is described as the new covenant. Healthy society, generous living and a spiritually rooted altruism can all be nurtured by the best instincts behind marriage. Placing baptism alongside this can even offer new possibilities of welcoming, embracing and teaching in the nature of the Christian life, the 'patterning power of the kingdom.'

All of you are engaged in God's mission so to transform lives. Similar instincts led to the exposure of the sham marriages sought by those who use human beings as *material* rather than *social* capital. Here, migrant workers were being treated as goods to be traded for individual gain. In this case being used to secure European citizenship by marriage. This became a very real issue for the parish clergy of the Birstall deanery. This is not rare and people are caught up in human trafficking all too frequently. There are those of you who work very closely with asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers and I receive a steady stream of requests for support and intervention in particular cases. I led a delegation of the West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council to the Home Office on this issue earlier this year. Why does it matter? Participation in Christ and the subsequent hope of transformation offers a very different vision of life together, both within marriage and as a basis for a healthy society. This was not just about illegal marriages it was about how the Gospel teaches us to treat people.

Then moving swiftly on – what of Swine Flu? Hardly a week passes without *The Times* having at least one front page headline on some new peril to our health, another threat to some oddly assumed immortality. A recent study of *Daily Mail* stories over the past two years suggests that every aspect and ingredient of our diet is in one way or another carcinogenic. Perhaps the only response is ‘Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die!’ This time, through the various P.C.T.s and national guidelines we had no choice but to respond.

As you can imagine I have received numerous cynical and even aggressive letters and emails. The only consolation might be that the archbishops will have received far more – perhaps even an hundredfold. There is, however, a good and profound reason for all this attention. In a church where sometimes people either undervalue or assume others to undervalue the sacraments, there has been an enormous upsurge of indignation at being deprived of the common sharing in the blood of Christ. A change in our sacramental life – even a temporary and legally possible change – has far-reaching effects. Why? As priests and deacons, you know what the administration of the sacraments mean to people. You see the church built up – often in a personal and local way which I cannot see. We know that the sacrament matters and transforms and builds us up. It is what our God is about through us here today.

All this suggests that the three words *God and Change* are sufficient to engage us, feed us, stimulate us and help us live and minister within the Christian life in our diocese in these coming three years. Where might it leave us in discerning the theme for our next conference at the end of that triennium? That’s a question that should be left in the air, not however in the ‘lap of the gods’ to return not quite to one of the media’s obsessions. What is obvious is that we cannot protect ourselves or hide ourselves from change, for change is of the very nature of our existence. We remain contingent even in the face of God’s necessity. But if in the midst of that contingency, as a church, we can let it become *transformative* so that change is not simply seen as being blown about by the winds of chance and fortune, then maybe we shall just begin to sense our participation in Christ and his ministry to an ever-changing world.