

The Hiddenness of the Gospel

Diocesan Synod

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Let me begin on rather a personal note. It takes us back almost exactly forty years, just three months before my father's death on Christmas Day in 1969. We had just finished Sunday lunch and my father engaged me in conversation about the future. He did not know (nor indeed we) that he was dying, although he had already had a very serious major operation for cancer the year before. I think we'd got on to the subject of the Church as I'd been delayed in getting back to lunch because the service had overrun. He'd said that presumably I'd be off to Evensong later on – that led him on to say: 'What do you think you *will* want to do eventually?' (I was then training to be a teacher). I said I thought I would teach. He replied: 'Are you sure you won't go "into the Church"? You know, I can see you ending up as a benign old vicar somewhere!'

It came like a bolt from the blue and I was more than a little reticent in my reply. It had passed through my mind and heart that I would offer for ordination but only very tentatively.

Neither my father nor mother were churchgoers. My mother had been confirmed but only, so to speak, as a 'passing out parade'; she never went to church. I can only remember seeing my father in church at family gatherings - christenings (as they'd say!), weddings and funerals. He was almost totally 'unchurched'; he had been a member of the temperance *Band of Hope*, a Christian organisation, but that had been no more than a fleeting dalliance. He enjoyed his pint. I think what took me by surprise in this conversation which moved me greatly was this sense of some inner religious impulse or consciousness in my father. He had sufficient depth of perception to know what religion is about and indeed to see that there was something of that in me. He was clear too that he was a believer, that religion somehow mattered, but he did nothing about it. This was all very disturbing, but in a positive and intriguingly encouraging way. It spoke somehow of religion being in people's hearts implicitly, inchoate, undeclared. Interestingly enough too he was a very generous, altruistic person; he always had an eye for the needs of others.

My mother even said to him once in my hearing: 'The trouble with you George is that you always see the good in people.' He was indeed also a local politician and had been drawn into that as a means of working for a better world.

Now I have begun here since it underpins a theme which has recurred tantalisingly often to me in the past few months. If I had to anchor it in a scriptural text, then that text would be Isaiah 45.15.

'Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.'

It's a text often used to describe the way in which in both the God of the Old and New Testaments seems to reveal himself in riddles and figures of speech. That is true, of course, also of Jesus' remarkable use of parables, stories and sayings sometimes which seem impenetrable *even to us now*.

There is, for example, that incident in Mark's gospel (in chapter 8) where Jesus is in the boat with the disciples and they'd forgotten to bring bread. Jesus responds by questioning them about the feeding of the five thousand and about how much was left over. They were baffled. Jesus asks: 'Do you not yet understand?' and the story ends there. They did not understand and as far as I know no one has so far finally unravelled the riddle, even two thousand years on.

But I think the conversation with my father about the future made me realise that this hiddenness of the gospel goes deeper still. Let me relate to you the interesting tale of Pompey, the Roman general who took Jerusalem in 63 B.C. Against all the normal sensitivities, Pompey insisted on entering not only the Temple, but even penetrating the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place of all. On entering that space they were astonished to find only – an empty room. This ironic and mysterious discovery

says something about our God's nature. Is there an inherent hiddenness about God even as he reveals himself to people?

I said this had pressed itself home to me significantly over the past months. Let me give you half a dozen very different instances of this.

I shall begin with two excellent but different presentations given to the college of bishops meeting in Oxford last week. The first was by David Marquand. I was eagerly looking forward to hearing Marquand having just read his book *Britain Since 1918: The Strange Career of British Democracy*. It is a fascinating book analysing our governments and Prime Ministers under four main categories and showing how our democracy has emerged - albeit very staggeringly - in the past century. It is a compassionate and generous book rooted in a real appreciation of humanity. His address was equally so. He showed how structures in society had collapsed over the past fifty years in Britain and how inequalities have grown. But it was his final few comments which hinted for me at this theme of Christianity's hiddenness.

He argued that even most secular humanism in Britain owed its roots to our Christian culture: the teaching of Jesus and its Jewish roots fashion almost all our most impressive values. He had no time for Richard Dawkins nor for aggressive secular humanism: 'If Dawkins thinks religion is a moribund corpse then why keep kicking it?' he asked. So here then you might say is our gospel *hidden in the political realities of our world*.

Then the other presentation at that bishop's meeting takes me to a second hiddenness, a hiddenness in financial structures. Andrew Dilnot, an economist, and a declared Christian offered us a tour de force. His lecture was amusing, compelling and surprising. The recession he argued would pass - recessions, even serious ones come and go. As a society we shall almost certainly continue to become better off. Most fascinating was his analysis of the redistribution of wealth through taxes and benefits. Despite the inequalities in our society, that redistribution is almost inconceivably dramatic.

The situation of the poorest without it would be dire; the willingness of the richer to give up income in taxes is revolutionary. Dilnot's punch line was - isn't this remarkable and what are the roots of such altruism? Answer; the Christian gospel and Christian values. Where else could it come from - and *why do we not tell people this?* Christ is *hidden* here in our *financial structures*.

Then there is a third very different strand. On a few occasions I have referred to Salley Vicker's marvellous novel *Miss Garnett's Angel*. I shall not rehearse the story here - that would spoil it for those who have not read it. Suffice to say it tells of a woman just retiring who has been fairly vehemently anti-religion all her life at the same time as being more than serious about morals. Her personality appears dry in the extreme. However, in her retirement and notably through a holiday in Venice, she sees beneath the surface another world entirely. God breaks through into her life in a way she could never have previously conceived. Salley Vickers' other novels have equal godly surprises. But this is true of so many other writers.

Read David Lodge and his Roman Catholic childhood positively forms his world view. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and *The Spire* explore human fallenness. Many of Evelyn Waugh's novels have the Christian story just below the surface as do Graham Greene's. So I could go on - you could tell me of as many as I could tell you. The gospel is *hidden* but often only just below the surface in literature.

But how about more life more *locally*. Here is a fourth focus. Every month, in Wakefield, Huddersfield, Halifax and Barnsley I with the help of Bishop Tony and the Archdeacons host a breakfast. At these breakfasts we gather leaders in each of these places from the public, private and voluntary sectors. The only overt religion there is a grace at the beginning of the meal. There is a talk which, very rarely, may be on a religious theme. The main aim is to help people working together, to network for a more healthy community and society. Here *we* offer a *hidden Christ* but often at these breakfasts, we discover it in others.

For many who attend those breakfasts have religious hinterlands or sensitivities far beyond what one might ever have imagined. Here is *Christ hidden in the midst of the local*. It is true of countless other gatherings also. For the past six years I have been on the council of the University of Huddersfield. Much the same could be said for many whom I meet there.

Then there is a fifth area to explore. Just two weeks ago Professor Grace Davie, an Anglican and a sociologist of religion addressed our Clergy Conference. Her analysis was fascinating. Seventy five percent of the population, at least, declare themselves believers, but most do not go to church except as much as my father did. Instead they opt for what Grace Davie called vicarious religion; believing without belonging. They believe (in some way), mostly they respect the churches and they hope that others will be there praying for them and their loved ones Sunday by Sunday. Now we cannot know how long this will continue but we dare not ignore it. It is a phenomenon most clearly seen in Europe and in some ways classically in England. It is something we all encounter.

One might describe it as *Christ hidden in folk religion*. Much of this bubbled to the surface in the controversy over the Church of England suggesting that weddings and baptisms might happen at the same time. Society has moved in such a direction as to require the church to respond if marriages in church are to remain part of the scene in England. Grace Davie also encouraged us not to be too defensive about those aggressive atheists. They are noisy because they believe that religion is once again being taken seriously. That ought to be an *encouragement to us* not a blow to our confidence.

These five instances, then, are just some ways in which religion remains a key part of the structures of our world, but yet is almost hidden in the fabric. Andrew Dilnot speaking of finance and the economy encouraged us to show with confidence how this hidden but essential contribution of our faith should be blazed forth.

In our breakfasts and in our links with the University of Huddersfield and other secular institutions that again is our aim: let us connect with the positive feelings that many have about the church and work with them. It is a key element within our missionary work. That too was the implicit message of David Marquand in relation to politics and government. We, as the explicit inheritors of the gospel message, as those engaged in the apostolic task, have it within our grasp to indicate to others from where our core values spring. In encouraging those to embrace these core values, can we also nurture them anew in the faith? Finally, I referred to literature in all its forms – novels and poetry. Recently *The Shack* has been popular amongst Christian readers. But can we not encourage much more reading of imaginative literature, poetry and prose, first of all amongst ourselves? In doing so we discover new ways to offer a proper apologetic, *a reason for the faith that is in us*.

I suppose, then, that might be the message in this coming triennium, that is to look outwards. Indeed of being obsessed (as it is so easy to become) with our internal issues and problems let us embrace the wider world, seeking the hidden Christ ever to be found in the midst of people and helping others to see Christ there too. It is about helping people to see that a *puzzling world* gives *meaning* in so many ways when seen *through the eyes of faith*.

Philip Toynbee, who died some years ago, was a good example of such religious imagination. Literary editor of the *Observer* newspaper, a journalist, a talented writer, and a lifelong atheist, he came from a family of well known non-believers and free-thinkers. His daughter Polly, also a journalist, remains an aggressive atheist. Philip, however, towards the end of his life became a pilgrim in search of faith. His two books, *Part of a Journey* and *End of a Journey* are still well worth reading. He died a practising Anglican with a strong relationship with Ty Mawr monastery in South Wales. In a most moving piece which he wrote after a visit to Peterborough Cathedral, he reflected on his journey as he finally accepted that he was a Christian believer.

Toynbee, late on his life, realised at last that the God whom he now recognised had been there all along in those *hidden ways* to which I have referred. In his *Confessions*, St Augustine admitted the very same:

'Late, late have I loved thee, O beauty so old and yet so new. Far, far have I sought thee where thou art, and now I have found thee, here in my heart.'

How can we persuade others to make that journey, to peep beneath the covers and see that the Christ who has saved us is there - not even hidden, but simply unobserved? How can we help open people's eyes? Can that be our task for the next three years not just as a synod and a diocese, but as the people of God in this part of Yorkshire?

Stephen Platten

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