

Hilfield Friary
August 23rd 2015: John 6. 52 - 69

Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Just occasionally a text crops up in the readings that has a truly contemporary resonance.

One of the defining characteristics of the second half of the twentieth century and the first fifteen years of the twenty-first, in the western world and particularly in western Europe, is a very dramatic decline in religious belief.

Do you also wish to go away? Over this period a huge number of people have ‘gone away.’

Every graph you look at tells the same story. There has been a huge and steep decline in religious belief. Just one statistic, though we all know it is true: in 1983 Anglicans made up 40% of the population, last year just 16%, and falling.

There are many reasons behind this huge shift in public attitudes, reasons that go back to the beginning of the age of Enlightenment in the early years of the seventeenth century. But whatever they are, increasingly religious faith is today very largely regarded as irrelevant, even absurd. It is taken less and less seriously in the public space, and though its buildings may be at the centre of so many towns and villages, in reality the church is increasingly on the margins.

Do you also wish to go away?

Part of this decline can be explained in terms of philosophy, with the rise of what – towards the end of the twentieth century – was called ‘post-modernism’. One feature of that was what the French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard called *the collapse of ‘grand narratives’*. The collapse of confidence in those overarching traditions of belief that hold meaning for society, and that most people, even if they may not be able to articulate it, believe in.

In the post-modern world there is no meaning that is ‘given’, no objective truth as such. The only meaning we can find is that which we create ourselves. One expression of this in the Church was the rise in the 1980s of a movement called ‘the Sea of Faith’ begun by the Cambridge intellectual and priest Don Cupitt. This movement unambiguously asserts that religion is a human creation, there is no ‘God’ in the sense that the Church has traditionally believed in. ‘God’ is just a code word for the highest summation of human values. The inspiration for this movement came from Matthew Arnold’s great melancholic poem *Dover beach* written in 1867:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
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.

We are engulfed in many crises ... the crisis of Islamist extremism, the crisis of the environment and climate change ... but arguably beneath them all lies this greatest crisis of all: the widespread loss of faith in a Transcendent Other, who can give human life shape and meaning, and against which all our conduct can be measured.

It *is* a crisis, *and* we are involved in a kind of gigantic experiment. Never before in the history of the world have whole societies abandoned religious belief in this way, abandoned belief that there is a meaning and purpose that is *given*, that, in some form, there is a Transcendent Other who has brought the world into being and whose truths and laws give it meaning. If our western world is no longer undergirded by such belief, or such belief is rapidly fraying and disintegrating, what happens?

There is a great void, a great emptiness. In his recent encyclical, Pope Francis writes in the most trenchant and challenging way about the environmental disaster we are facing. He writes about the cry of the wounded earth, about the loss of bio-diversity, about the acidification of the oceans and the collapse of marine life, he writes about the desertification of the soil and the threat of the droughts and the storms and the multiple overwhelms of the ecological catastrophe that is potentially coming upon the world. But *underneath it all*, he identifies *a crisis of meaning, a crisis of direction and purpose*. He identifies a void, a great emptiness, which cannot be filled by just accumulating more and more stuff, which cannot be assuaged by the drug of consumerism – this is no answer.

In the end we cannot live with the non-belief that our world, our universe, is just a random meaningless accident, we cannot live with this kind of nihilism.

To whom can we go? It is a profound and universal question. In all kinds of ways, an awful lot of people in the last half century particularly have been asking that question. In more recent times some have turned to Islam – or rather the perversion of it that is now causing such havoc in the world; some have been attracted to Buddhism and what is called ‘mindfulness’ meditation, which is good and beautiful. Some have been drawn to other forms of new age spirituality, and some have turned their face to the cold north wind of atheism, and tried to make it *meaningful*.

To whom can we go?, asks Simon Peter. The human mind *must* discover meaning.

But then very rapidly he follows it by saying ‘You have the words of eternal life’. You have the words.

What distinguishes us humans from the rest of creation, from the animals and the birds and the sea creatures, is our capacity to use *words*. We have language. The noises we make out of our mouths are not just instinctive drives – mating calls, alarm calls, aggression noises – we can make the world recognisable and give it shape through language, through *words*. Above all we construct meaning through narratives, we tell stories that give our worlds meaning, stories that tell us why we are here and where we have come from and how we are to behave, stories that give our cultures shape, stories which we collectively say ‘yes’ to. Stories that are ‘*grand narratives*’ and that embrace us and give us meaning and direction and which curb our appetites and build our loves and loyalties. The Hindus have their stories – the great epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana – the Greeks had their stories – the Iliad and the Odyssey – and we have had our story.

‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, and the earth was without form and void ... and God said: let there be light ... let there be the sun and the moon and the stars ... let there be the earth and the plants and the creatures ... let there be humans created in our likeness who have a purpose and meaning to care for the earth and to love ... to love God and to love one another.’

This is our story. There is a beginning and there is *a meaning given* in it. Life is not meaningless, the world *is* gift, and there *is* a Giver, and that Giver has revealed himself, and his name is Love. And the particular manifestation of that Love, in whom we believe, *told* stories. He told vivid stories ... offensive stories ... shocking stories ... stories that broke through people's prejudices and revealed the nature of that Love:

- a son squanders his father's fortune in a far country, ends up in a pig-sty and returns full of shame and is welcomed without a murmur of reproach to a great banquet;
- a group of men are all paid the same wage whenever they began their work – in the morning, at midday, or just an hour before sunset;
- a total stranger kneels down and binds up the wounds of a mugged roadside victim while the professionally religious walk by.

In a world where his people were being driven into the ground by a fascist power, this story teller was a meaning-creator, a hope-giver, and his message was clear: there *is* a Divine Other, and his reign of unconditional love and grace *is* the undersong of the world.

So Simon Peter says – and notice the progression, the hesitation of his vocabulary – ‘we have **come to believe – and know**’. ‘It has been a slow journey with all sorts of questions along the way – belief is always full of doubt – but we have not walked away saying it is all absurd. We have dared to stay with, to hold onto, and not give up on the great myth of God, however ridiculous it may sometimes seem. We have listened to and inhabited the stories that are at its heart. We have heard *the words*, and we have come to discover that they make the deepest sense of life and they bring an extraordinary joy ... and – as we have trusted these stories– we have come to **know life!**

There is real conviction in that **‘know’**. How can we express it? Perhaps something along the lines of: ‘we have found the knowledge of the Love of God existentially grounded in our heart ... it is no longer just a creed. Oh, it may be absurd. But whether it is absurd or not, it is *there* – the ground of our life - and it makes us sing and dance and be creative ... ‘

‘We have come to believe and *know*, that *you are the Holy One*’ (this is very near Thomas's ‘my Lord and my God’ – that bursts out of him in the upper room). ‘And because you *are* ... we *are*. ‘

What this text suggests is that there is a passing *beyond* the words of faith, *beyond* the beliefs of religion, into a knowing of the Ground of that belief. A passing *beyond* the stories, into intimate relationship with the story-teller.

Hence much of this Gospel is concerned *not* with words ... but with eating the bread, with sharing the very life.

As many walked away, a small group walked further and much more deeply in.

And that is where we are today. Over the last 70 years many have walked away . **We** are challenged to travel much more deeply *in* ... into the knowing. And on the journey shed an awful lot of baggage.

The Church may have to shed a lot of its buildings, a lot of its behaviour and practices, a lot of its assumptions, and even give up on a lot of its boundaries ... about gays, about other faiths, to name but two – if we are to be true to the life of the story-teller; if we are to be more free and more credible – more people who, very clearly, are in love with Love ... and *know*.

Patrick Woodhouse.