

them. Don't let looks deceive you. There is far more going on under the surface than you can possibly imagine. And if at times the church feels a little weird, with more than its fair share of awkward people, just remember that this is the genius of the church. For all our attempts to make the church into a house of decorum, I guess it is always and ever will be a cave of Adullam.

The Peace of the Lord, Ian

Preaching as Proclamation – Singing a Different Song

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I work as Deputy Head of Counselling at The Well Counselling in Malvern, counselling and supervising. I have privileged access to the lives of many people in this quiet town, who live far from the church or Christian faith. Not only can they not find their way home, they don't know there is anything that might be home. I sometimes ask, "Are you a person of faith? Do you have a belief?" One woman said, "I believe in angels - isn't that wet? But I do, somehow." God is speaking to them in partial and piecemeal ways. They don't yearn for religion. They yearn for healing, for something better, for a new way of living, for some goodness and grace in their lives. It is as though our clients are shouting and whispering at the same time. They shout: "Stop the pain for me, it's driving me mad." They whisper: "Am I a good person? How has this happened to me? Will this be all there is?"

We also hear today voices of despair that penetrate the world of ordinary people, that there is no truth, no vision, no bigger picture. We just have to make ourselves up as we go along. Julian Barnes said: "I don't believe in God anymore, but I miss him." Similarly, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir: "If God is dead, then man is not free. He is just alone."

In William Fiennes' book *The Snow Geese*, he narrates his own story of following the great migration of snow geese from Texas to the north of the American continent. His own story is that of a

young man who becomes ill, partially well, then restless for something, for health, well-being, freedom from weakness. He studies birds and migration. He decides to answer the restlessness by travelling north with the great skeins of geese. He speaks in his book of the early students of migration who kept birds in cages. Certain birds in the autumn, though they had always been caged, became restless in a certain direction. Then another species would gather at the different end of the big cages, restless, frantic to leave. How did they know where and when? They became restless in a certain direction.

The truth from above

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Hebs 1.1).

If Jesus is the full and final truth about God, what is that truth?

1. Despite all the pain, the cruelty of humanity, the unfairness of life, the vastness of the universe, the complexities of quantum physics, there is an intelligence behind it all - vast, compassionate, wise. That intelligence, God, has our best interests in his heart. He thinks about us. We are not alone.
2. God has put the world right in his own way when Jesus was crucified. It is a way of suffering love. He engulfs the sin, the selfishness, the cruelty, the perversity in a heart that is as vast as the universe. This is at unthinkable cost to God that his world might be whole again.
3. Love and beauty and grace walked on this earth and though we could not bear it, tried to destroy it, yet it lives. Jesus really rose again from the dead. He is alive in our future. He is the source of our all hope. Death is not our end.
4. The way things are is not the way they will remain. We shall live forever, we will see the sun fade, the stars fall and the earth remade, the waters will flow fresh and pure again, the oceans will teem with life, the mountains will sing for joy. Because of Jesus, the renewer of all nature, nothing we have spoiled will be spoiled forever. Jesus is the full and

final truth that everything is going to change for the better - in God's way and in God's time.

These are the good news of our faith, but many Christians simply don't get it. Maybe because we do not preach it well enough, often enough, artfully enough.

Preaching that proclaims is to be telling the story that comes from above. Christianity is more than a set of ideas, but it is not less than that. The pressure of culture is for us to turn a set of public ideas which once turned the world upside down into a set of introverted and narcissistic ideas about spirituality and personal development. There is pressure to be an institution rather than a movement – an institution can be controlled, bought and sold, but a movement is more elusive and powerful. We are on the way, I hope, to becoming a movement again, but the road is a painful one.

According to Will Willimon: "There may be religions that begin with long walks in the woods, communing with nature, getting close to the trees. There may be religions that begin by delving into the recesses of a person's ego, rummaging around in the psyche. Christianity is not one of those religions." (*Peculiar Speech*). There are two reasons why he says this.

A mood of anti-intellectualism

The first is we are dealing with a long-term mood of anti-intellectualism within the church and society. Christianity and Christian worship has been overwhelmed by the mood of Romanticism that began in the eighteenth century. It is very clearly seen, say, in the poetry of Wordsworth. He is struck by earthly beauty and then it makes him introspective and he talks about himself – sublimely and beautifully. The literary critic Harold Bloom argues that after Wordsworth, "... poetry ceased to have any subject except subjectivity itself, carried to extremes of self-consciousness. In this crucial sense, Emily Dickinson, W B Yeats, T S Eliot ... and so many since have been Wordsworthian poets" (Harold Bloom, *Genius*).

The mood is one of anti-intellectualism, an absence of any serious attempt in many churches and dioceses to take seriously the teaching and training task of ministry. We have fallen in love with Christian self-consciousness. I confess to having been an active participant of this movement, but it has become unbalanced. The Lebanese diplomat and theologian Charles Malik said that "The

problem is not only to win souls, but to save minds. If you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world, you will soon discover you have not won the world. Indeed, it may turn out you have actually lost the world."

The second is that we commonly misunderstand a key difference between our Buddhist friends, now so massively influential in therapy and education, and ourselves as Christian preachers. Christian spirituality does not arise out of questions about human self-consciousness or out of a spiritual quest for a sense of the divine. It starts with the outraged cry of the Psalmist: "When will the evil of the wicked come to an end?" (Ps 7.9). In other words, it is political before it is personal. I have nothing but respect for our Buddhist friends and my Buddhist colleagues in the world of therapy – their ideas about mindfulness and their practice of profound compassion I have no issue with. However, I am saying, "It is not enough."

Subjectivity is not enough. We need a story about the world being put right in God's way, not ours. In God's time, not ours. Through God's power, not ours. The mood is profound subjectivity. The institutions have largely failed and been discredited. The shrill voices of evangelical right wingers in the States are an embarrassment. These things should not make us more introverted, but rather more engaged with ideas that can change everything. We need to take ourselves more seriously. We are like ambassadors of a country that not even been recognised yet, but we have been sent and appointed.

In the call of Jeremiah (Jer 1.4-9), there was a choice. There was a power that would be given to him, but it wasn't self-generated. He was given a God-anointed mouth to speak to his culture. He was a man under authority and with authority. If there is a truth sent from above, then we need a text with authority. Preaching as proclamation is necessarily tied to a high view of scripture. If we have no authoritative scriptures, we have nothing but tradition, and our day is over as a religious force. Whatever the lovely variety of traditions and generousities we have within the Anglican church (for example), they cannot exist as a living force unless they stand firm on a text with authority over mind and heart. This is an axial and not an incidental truth.

According to the Bible Society, Christians in the West pay less attention to their sacred text than any other faith. Brueggemann

points out (in *Cadences of Home*) that, when the exiles were stripped of everything but their distinctive speech, they resolutely kept talking in their own faith language, which kept a different world in view. Had they started to talk the faith language of the empire, their own distinctiveness would have been lost to them. My contention is that unless we as ministers are ministers of the Word before all else, we shall get engulfed in post enlightenment language about spirituality and religion. Our language talks about discipleship, not spirituality; it talks about holiness, not self-realisation; it talks about a long trajectory into God. Our language has Christians out in a world where all is lost until God steps in; where transformation is expected; where God speaks back from the silence; where newness comes from outside rather than from within. There is something ragged and desperate and aching about our language. It is that language which creates the new possibility of God's intervention. It is a view from above, God-given.

In the film, *Arrival*, a linguist is tasked with understanding the language of aliens. When she begins to really get the language of the aliens, she also enters their world, in which she begins to experience time differently, with profound effects on her life and choices for the future. There is a dialogue when she is explaining that to speak a language is to enter the world of the people for whom it is mother-tongue.

Imagine this, therefore, about the Bible. When we soak ourselves in it, give its study first importance, learn a little Greek, possibly some Hebrew, it changes the way we see things. Christianity is a way before it is a truth, and you only see the truth of when you walk in the way of it. To enter the world of the Bible faithfully is not to cast your brains away or your critical faculties, but to enter it reverently, willing to be obedient to it, willing for it to come alive, being open to it surprising you. We have to learn its language. Authority for the church and the preacher resides not in dogmatic statements and theology, but in the rawness of these complex, difficult, wonderful books and stories and letters. Proclamation preaching, I am sure, cannot happen without this. It needs the note of authority that is experienced by us as preachers, first of all, and then we start to change and we cling to it, we love it, we have a passion for it - because it is the truth from above, it is from heaven, from God.

Conclusion

A good part of my life over the last 15 years has been in training Anglican clergy. I am convinced, as are many who cannot speak openly, that there is no hope for the Church of England as an institution. I cannot speak for the other denominations, but it looks like those who have been called to lead are being called to take the people of God somewhere they have never been before. It's every man and woman for themselves. Our calling as preachers must be tied to a fresh experience of the Bible as God's Living Word, post liberal, post critical, possibly post denominational. Then we shall be in good company with those who, in times of great upheaval, have walked this way – Augustine, Calvin, Pascal, Barth. Karl Barth described beginning to preach the gospel in Safenwil as if he were reaching out in the darkness and confusion for a steadying rope, and hearing above him, in the night, shockingly, a great bell tolling out. The speaking God of the Christian faith found in Holy Scripture is the one who alone speaks to us of grace, mercy and freedom.