

ST MARKS CENTRE FOR RADICAL CHRISTIANITY

For a moment think about some of those great Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau or those nineteenth century biblical scholars like Strauss and Renan and great twentieth century theologians like Schweitzer, Bonhoeffer, Von Rad, Barth, Moltmann. Recall the modernist churchmen of the 1920's and 1930's such as Henry Major and Hastings Rashdall and remember the excitement of the 1960's and early 1970's with the publication of *Honest to God* and the writings of Maurice Wiles, Dennis Nineham, John Hick and the whole Myth of God Incarnate debate. Call to mind the excitement of ordinary folk beginning to be stirred up in their thinking by prelates such as David Jenkins. More recently in the last twenty years, think about the contribution of the Jesus Seminar scholars in the USA, writers such as Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Elaine Pagels, Robert Funk and the challenges to old ways of thinking of Christianity put by Jack Spong.

Now consider how paradoxical it all seems that we have entered this third millennium with this inheritance of theological enquiry and speculation and at the same time we have seen the rise of fundamentalist religion in Christianity and Islam, the growing conservatism of the Church in matters of doctrine and ethics, the alliance of the political right in the USA with some of the most alarming forms of Christian belief. Moreover the Anglican Communion seems to be tearing itself apart over homosexuality. Is all our learning and experience in vain?

Of course radical reappraisal goes hand in hand with conservative backlash in religion as in politics. So where does this leave the churches in the British Isles today? Much has been written, many surveys taken, revealing the constant demise of church going by all ages and sections of our society. On whatever basis you make your assumptions – statistics on rites of passage, Sunday attendances, financial strength – the church is now in pretty big trouble, some would say meltdown and this is disguised to some extent by the rise of larger independent congregations outside the so called main line churches. These largely evangelical gatherings can be very vocal and attract much attention. Courses such as the Alpha course dominate the scene. Rarely do we associate radical or liberal Christianity with success and church growth. Indeed Jack Spong and others speak of the growing numbers of church 'alumni', those who have deserted the churches because of their own questioning faith finding little comfort and few answers in an increasingly dogmatic and certain church.

For 27 years I have been an ordained Anglican clergyman, brought up as boy and man in middle of the road Anglicanism, convinced of the strength of the parish system and the place of the local church in the community. Theologically educated in the late 1970's I assumed that those insights from the enlightenment, from the Modernists, the *Honest to God* challenges etc could be taken for granted in shaping an intelligent and credible faith. I had assumed that the Church of England was shaped by the critical analysis of scripture, by the lessons of history and tradition and the insights of reason and modern scientific and other branches of learning. So I am unsurprisingly a paid up MCU member!

For the last 18 years I have had the privilege of serving as the vicar in the parish of St Mark's Broomhill in Sheffield. But I think that it is only in the last seven or eight years that I would say that as a liberal church we really needed to move beyond a kind

of cosy complacency, which had assumed that most Anglicans at least held the same kind of liberal views, when in fact we were surrounded by Anglican churches and many others, who seemed to be offering a crude biblical literalism, a frightening agenda of rigid personal ethics, a crude homophobia and a resurgent discrimination against women.

At St Marks we were introduced to the writing of Marcus Borg, and in particular his *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Here was a writer who combined biblical scholarship and personal faith and who wrote in ways accessible to the person in the pew. Reading Borg's books was like a breath of fresh air. I decided to email Borg and ask him to come to Sheffield, to speak at St Mark's. To my surprise he accepted my invitation and this first conference was to set the scene for developments which led to the formation of our St Mark's Centre for Radical Christianity. That Borg conference six years ago was a sell out and it brought together people from all over the country who yearned for a more credible Christianity. Marcus suggested that I then invite his great friend Dominic Crossan to come, which he did, and since then we have had the privilege of hearing Jack Spong, Kenneth Leach, Elizabeth Templeton, John Vincent and Richard Holloway who officially 'launched' the Centre at the 2003 conference.

What does the Centre aim to do and why have the word radical in the title? From the outset we recognised the strength of being identified with a church base. St Marks, since its rebuilding in 1963 has been associated with what Paul Badham wrote about in the April Signs of the Times, namely the Anglican liberal tradition. So we are rooted in Sheffield and supported heavily by a large and enthusiastic liberally minded congregation! However we wanted to cross denominational boundaries and we wished to be at the sharp end of theological reflection and action. Our radical title was meant to invoke the spirit of Honest to God, not the fundamentalist zealotry which radicalism seems to bring to contemporary minds. Radical Christianity, Radical Jesus, Radical Kingdom seemed to us on the Council of St Marks CRC a way of making us think again of the exciting call of Jesus to call people into inclusive communities of love and justice. So our aim at St Marks CRC is to promote as many seminars and conferences as is feasible in order to bring people together, to encourage a sharing of ideas and resources and to offer to those many 'church alumni' folk the opportunity to find a way back into a church community which has something to offer them and in which they can flourish in their discipleship.

The radical message of Jesus leads many of us to work for a Christian church which challenges prejudice at all levels, which offers a vision of community where all people are honoured as children of the same God. This must be worked out on the ground, at the parish level. It takes time to build up trust but the fruits of patient striving to listen afresh to the message of Jesus can lead to a growth in the church, when folk are offered the building blocks of a progressive faith. I have now gone past the stage in my ministry of trying to please the establishment, of towing the line, of sticking to the rules. The radical Jesus, whom I try to serve encourages me to offer same sex blessings to those in faithful committed relationships; the radical Jesus will have no truck with prejudice against women so we should rejoice in the fact that ECUSA has appointed a woman as its Presiding Bishop. These things should be taken for granted and the church should, believe, now be at the forefront of other issues which affect all of us – the fight against global poverty, the concern over climate

change, the rise in alcohol and drug abuse, the plight of refugees – the desire to build the radical Kingdom of God on earth. This is what will make us credible in society.

If a church offers this vision and is prepared, as Jack Spong demands, to undergo a total reformation, both theologically and in its praxis, there may still be time to capture the hearts and minds of those who currently would see the church as irrelevant, at best in a time warp, at worst the begetter of bigotry.

At our last conference, addressed by Trevor Pitt, on the subject of violence and theology, we were reminded of the crucial role liturgy plays in shaping our ideas and awareness, our concepts of God and community. Again a radical Jesus leads us to look afresh at all we say and sing in worship and reappraise some of the central notions of God which we have inherited in our centuries old liturgies.

Our modest Centre in its own small way, alongside MCU, PCN Britain, LGCM, WATCH, Inclusive Church and other organisations, bears witness to the fact that out there, there are perhaps millions of people who recognise a spiritual dimension to their lives but who when they turn to organised religion are so often deterred by its straightjacket of orthodoxy and its inward looking nature. Perhaps liberal minded groups need to work even closer together to offer a Christianity which has both integrity, vision and bite. A Christianity fitted indeed for this third millennium.

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