

Spiritual Revolution

**Christmas Day Sermon 2012
St Mary-le-Tower Ipswich – 10.30am Christmas Family Eucharist
Revd Canon Charles Jenkin, vicar**

It is easy to forget, or simply not notice the revolutionary impact of Jesus, as we celebrate Christmas amid the tinsel, the romance of the Christmas story, and the general cosiness of Christmastime. Don't misunderstand, I am not criticising the tinsel and cosiness; it all has its place. We just mustn't make the mistake of thinking that this is all that Jesus is about.

For Jesus was actually a one-man spiritual revolution. He taught that salvation and enlightenment was not to be found through a system of religious rules and practices, but through learning to be a beloved child of God, standing in his grace alone, forgiven and forgiving. It was indeed a spiritual revolution, and Jesus was crucified for it.

But even the idea of a revolution that is spiritual can seem odd today. So often spiritual things seem to be about nostalgia (especially at Christmas), about things like tradition and continuity. These are of course not unimportant (tradition and continuity), but we really must not lose sight of the fact that in the religion of Jesus Christ, the tradition and continuity that is Christianity, this is a tradition with a spiritual revolution at its heart.

Moreover, this is not a revolution that is just about spirituality and the practice of faith. It is nothing less than a revolution in our fundamental vision of God himself. God, it turns out, is not a remote and patriarchal figure dispensing eternal justice, controlling everything in sight, and zapping anyone who gets in his way. All that vision, really, is a depressingly human and, dare I say it, rather male vision of divine power.

Jesus however revealed an altogether different divine reality, the God whose chief characteristic is that he loves. He loves all (note all, everyone, everything) that he has made however flawed it has become, and such divine love flows naturally and eternally into acts of loving and self-giving service. This is the fundamental thing that the whole story of Jesus teaches us. It is nothing less than the revolution of the Cross, a spiritual revolution that is about who God is and what he calls us to.

And this, today, Christmas Day, is the start of that revolutionary story of Jesus. What we really celebrate at Christmas is the beginning of a spiritual revolution.

All of which makes the Church's tawdry antics over women bishops and gay marriage look distinctly out of place, or worse. You know there are some people, church people, who keep saying that the Church should stop obsessing about issues of gender and get on with more important things. Really! Really? So the spiritual status of half the human race is a side issue is it? Really? So the traditions and customs that surround marriage, our most treasured loving human relationships, our celebrating of love that is faithful, stable, lasting and divine, that's a side issue too is it? Really?

Absolutely these are important issues in the world, and absolutely they are deeply spiritual issues too. And the trouble is that, far from being in the vanguard of a spiritual revolution with a radical vision of God's love at its heart, a vision revealed in the birth, life, crucifixion

and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Church finds itself pathetically running along behind trying to keep up. And the reason is that the Church in these particular matters has lost its radical edge. It's shaming.

You see, the modern liberal western culture around us, is not simply a degenerate culture that has lost its way. In fact far from it. Of course there are some degenerate aspects, but in many ways ours is a culture whose grasp of the underlying realities and priorities and true values of human existence have grown very remarkably in the last 100 years. I am not just talking here just of new modern scientific knowledge, although this is in many ways the real driver of change. I am talking about the advances in vision for what makes for flourishing human communities, about things like democracy, freedom and human rights.

Of course these are complex things which are not easy to get right, but they have transformed the global landscape; they have transformed humanities vision of what is truly good and right. Moreover, the full equality of women in human societies is right up there in the forefront at all levels. It is not a side issue. It is not a side issue from the heights of government and commerce to the key local changes that are needed in the developing world.

And increasingly gay rights are coming to the fore too, it cannot be avoided. And actually the Church should rejoice that, in more and more human societies, traditional hatred and prejudice of those who are simply different (not deviant) is being overcome. The Church should rejoice that this difference is at last being accepted and indeed honoured where it flows into that divine kind of loving which is faithful, stable and lasting.

The gift we celebrate today, in the Christ child on Christmas Day, is not the gift of nostalgia. It is a gift of spiritual revolution that goes to the heart of human living. It starts with the astonishing revelation of almighty God in a helpless baby. And it continues with the revolutionary life and teaching of Jesus. We should never fail to be amazed and to stand, indeed kneel, in wonder.

But equally we should never fail to follow through, and follow on to where Christ's radical vision of the love of God leads, a love that needs to inform every step of our journey, a love that needs to pervade every part of the life of the Church. This is the true gift of Christmas, a spiritual revolution that never ends. Happy Christmas.

Charles Jenkin
25th December 2012