

SERMON for Evensong at St Mary's, Stoke D'Abernon on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, 16th July 2017

I have just returned from an exhausting but stimulating 3 full days at the Modern Church Annual Conference at the Christian Conference Centre in Hoddesdon and would like to share with you some of what we heard and a little of my thoughts on what the speakers had to say. The conference enjoyed the tantalising title 'God: None, One, Three or Many?' So it was bound to be both stimulating and challenging!

I must have been a bit late to lunch on the second day, as the fish had run out. Having been given instead my never-the-less tasty stew (I really only go for the food!) I looked for a table with a spare space and found myself sitting opposite the well-known author and theologian, Christina Rees. She was deep in conversation with a scholarly priest, Revd Tim Stead, who has written several books, but the ones they were discussing were two he had written on Mindfulness. I have long felt this was a discipline I should investigate, so was interested in what I heard. Christina was hanging on Tim's every word with rapt concentration. It was only when I finally managed to read her label that I discovered who she was and was amazed by her young age and her pretty looks; and what intrigued me even more, her humility and obvious vulnerability.

The theme of 'humility' was a constant throughout the conference...humility in describing who or what God means to you...humility in the face of majesty...humility in what we preach...and vulnerability too in accepting falling numbers and ageing congregations, not pursuing the modern craze for popularism to 'pack 'em in'. There is no room for triumphalism in the Church; Jesus died on

the cross. It is the wounded body of Jesus that Ascends. The gospel imperative is one of brokenness. The metaphors used were the bread broken at communion before it is offered; and you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.

To my way of thinking there is a tendency towards two great heresies in the Church today; Triumphalism, which denies the hard reality of suffering; and is too often associated with the other: raw Emotion. This appeal to our emotions, the 'tingle factor' was illustrated by David Stancliffe, the ex-bishop of Salisbury, when he told us of the time he attended a Church of England primary school assembly and an angelic looking blond haired, blue eyed child sang a modern worship song at the end of which there was not a dry eye in the house.

Afterwards the bishop told the head teacher that the choice of song was profoundly un Christian, it was all about me, me, me...I can't remember how many times the pronoun was sung, but it was the child who became the object of worship, not God. Whipping up emotion in a crowd is very dangerous. We see it in the mass rallies of despotic regimes from Hitler, to Stalin, to North Korea, but we met it first in the crowd which cried 'Crucify'.

There is a mad imperative today to succeed, every church has the word 'growth' in her mission statement. There is a tendency to pack our churches by preaching certainty, not 'the faith'; and by whipping up emotion and the 'feel good factor'; but we should not be afraid of falling numbers, only of not being True.

Some years ago now my husband and I went to Kashmir on a pilgrimage to the cave high in the Himalayas where the Hindu god, Siva instructed his disciples. It was an amazing experience. Being a Hindu

pilgrimage in a Muslim region we were guarded all the way up by the Indian army. Everyone welcomed us; it was all very good natured and blessings were bestowed on us, both by the army and other pilgrims. It was also the only time I have ever been body searched at 14,000ft. When we finally reached the holy cave after 3 days climbing up the mountain (the last day in deep snow at that altitude) I was greeted by a handsome young man who said (in perfect English....how did he guess!) 'I am a priest of the Lord Siva, and I like your smile, and I bless you', and he marked my head with the ubiquitous red spot; and I did indeed feel truly blessed.

Siva came up more than once during the conference. He is the Hindu destroyer god, but he destroys in order to allow new creation to emerge. Several times the speakers referred to the Holy Spirit as the 'disrupter'; which perhaps isn't so different. In order to grow, to journey, to speak to the world today, we need to listen, not just to what the Church has to say, but to truth revealed through science and the contemporary world, and indeed, other faiths. If the Church is to be relevant it needs to be true, to embrace (with humility) science and scholarship. To discard outdated and irrelevant doctrine and prejudice. Above all to be free.

When Modern Church began some 120 years ago it was part of a movement that defended new scientific findings and biblical scholarship against fundamentalism; and we believe, though the specific issues may change, that approach is needed today as much as ever it was.

We understand that genuine faith is committed to the search for truth, wherever it comes from, that it is possible to talk about God in ways

that make sense in our time and culture, always humbly acknowledging that we can never have absolute certainty.

Bishop David Stancliffe had us all spellbound. He has moved, in his retirement, from preaching, to music. And music was an analogy he used throughout his address, he even had us all singing a 'round' at the end of his talk. In particular he referred to choral singing, which only works when the singers are following their own music while listening to the melody of the other parts. He emphasised that we are all different people, singing different notes, but when we listen to one another we produce harmony. He also told the story how, after an orchestra had a guest-visit from the conductor Claudio Abbado, they were asked what he told them to do, and they said "He didn't tell us very much actually, but just made us listen to one another". I am sure Bishop David would applaud the musical tradition in this lovely church. Not seductive facile choruses, but the pursuit of excellence in worship.

We were reminded to listen for the music of heaven. Once again Hinduism can teach us a great deal. For them the divine harmony is present in the music of the universe.... UUMMMM....it goes right through you, it exists both inside and outside your very being, it is the music of prayer and touches the divine within and without ourselves.

And Hindus pray by spontaneously painting pictures of their gods where ever they happen to be, just all around them, on stones, on pillars, on beams, on trees, as an expression of their harmony with the sacred in nature.

There is a rather nice story I was told the other day of a rather patronising school inspector visiting a classroom in which a 6 year old girl was painting vigorously, using lots of colour, loads of paint and

dramatic sweeps of the brush. 'And what have we here?' asks the school inspector. 'I'm painting God' replies the little girl, not interrupting her work. 'Oh, I don't think we know what God looks like'; replies the inspector. 'Well you will soon' she was told.

We are called to worship, not a comprehensible, but a mysterious God, and there are many unanswered questions with which we need prayerfully to grapple. Mary's desolate cry of pain in this evening's anthem echoes that of mothers throughout the world who have their children torn from them.....there are times when we seem to search in vain for a compassionate God.

Again and again our speakers reverted to talking about the Trinity. I do not think this surprising as many of the world's religions have settled on a Trinity in an attempt to understand a mysterious divinity.

The Father, better understood as Creator is met within his/her/their creation; but this wonderful creation is never-the-less shot through with pain and destruction. Evolution has been responsible for terrible waste and animal suffering....earthquakes, tsunamis, droughts, floods and hurricanes, happen; and this cries out for an answer.

The Son; the glory of Christianity! Yet when we read the gospels there are unanswered contradictions; he tells us to pluck out our eyes, cut off our hands, hate our father and mother; he called the woman at the well a dog! These are hard unethical sayings from which we should not shrink.

The Spirit, the Disrupter draws us out to the boundaries rather than allowing us to retreat into orthodoxy. This is not a safe place to be.

But Spirit is also the Comforter, the bringer of Peace and Harmony, the Jewish Shalom, the Muslim Salam, the Hindu Shanti Mantra
.....UUMMM....

Gail Partridge

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Note: the anthem at the service, sung by our Ouseley Choral Scholar Emily Wenham, was 'Tell me, some pitying angel', by Henry Purcell, with words by Nahum Tate.

New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians: A dramatic situation is presented from a single viewpoint in Tell me, some pitying angel (The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation) z196 (1693), perhaps the closest Purcell came to writing an Italianate cantata; Nahum Tate's text is an astonishingly vivid and human portrayal of a mother who has lost her child, and Purcell's five-section setting uses his full repertory of affective devices, including, most memorably, the cries of 'Gabriel!' set to high repeated Gs over a series of increasingly clashing descending harmonies.

See also

<http://saturdaychorale.com/2013/01/18/henry-purcell-1659-1695-tell-me-some-pitying-angel-the-blessed-virgins-expostulation-z196/>

<http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/tw.asp?w=W7223>