

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick Epiphany 3 2012

We're in the season of Epiphany when the Church celebrates the revelation of God's presence in a number of momentous events – most significantly the arrival of the Magi and their recognition of Jesus as a heavenly king; the Baptism of Jesus by John and the recognition of his calling from God; and Jesus' first miracle of changing water into wine and the genesis of recognition by some that God's Chosen One had arrived. But for many in our own time these epiphanies, these recognitions, are at best a thing of the past and at worst *delusions* that have brought great *harm* upon humanity and creation.

This week the Bishop of Coventry called clergy together to talk about atheism or, more precisely, to look at David Bentley Hart's award winning book *Atheist Delusions*. In some respects Hart's volume is two books. So the central part is a detailed, historical analysis of important (and to some extent) taken for granted parts of the history of Western Europe, and how they're not always what we're led to believe. For example, it's commonly held that ancient Roman and Greek culture was a time of reason and science, which was extinguished by Christian dogma only to be rediscovered in the age of Enlightenment; a landmark event in this process was when the great library of Alexandria was pillaged and destroyed by Christian Zealots in the fifth century; and the malign influence of Christianity was only broken following the Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries. Hart's historical scrutiny reveals such re-telling of events to be caricatures – science and superstition continued to flourish in the Dark and Middle Ages as they had done in Rome and Athens; the Alexandrian library was not sacked by Christian fanatics and the Wars of Religion were not *actually* about religion.

And this careful sifting of cultural history is 'bookended' by a much more raucous and robust attack on the modern phenomenon of New Atheism and its principle protagonists Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. In which Hart sets about their lazy thinking and willful misreading of history, whilst lamenting that contemporary proponents of atheism fail to match up to past, atheist giants such as David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell. Having said all that, of course atheism only has a relatively recent past.

Another respected, cultural commentator (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*) has written a book which explores why virtually everyone believed in God *before* 1500 but *since* that time disbelief has become much more prevalent. And he suggests there were three particular aspects of our world *before* the 16th century which underpinned belief in God. First, God was seen as responsible for the natural world; second, belief in God's rule undergirded society, politics and justice; and third, people believed in an enchanted world influenced by angels, demons and all kinds of spiritual realities. For *some* these three elements are still in place but for *many* – especially in the West – these three underpinnings of belief have crumbled.

So is there anything to replace them or is Christian faith *merely* an old crumbling ruin? Well ... that same writer believes religious faith in the future will be based three different foundations: first, religious experience; second our search for meaning; and third, the intoxication of art and poetry. And ... interestingly ... in these three supports to a contemporary Christian faith we're close to those ancient experiences which we celebrate at Epiphany, of: Jesus' Baptism, the journey of the Magi and the turning of water into

wine. Let me briefly explain.

First, religious experience comes in many forms. It can be an outburst of communal excitement such as an exuberant act of worship or being caught up by the Holy Spirit; it can be an personal spiritual experience of the kind that John Wesley spoke about when he described how his ‘heart was strangely warmed’ by God; it can be a waiting in stillness and silence which such writers on spirituality as Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen have reflected upon. In accounts of the epiphany at the River Jordan, when Jesus was baptised by John, we can see the Gospel writers extending themselves to put into words the religious experience Jesus had at that moment when heaven seemed to physically open and God confirmed a special calling to ministry, symbolised in the image of a dove. Religious experience continues to be a significant factor in our world whether that’s individuals being touched by God’s presence in creation or in (what’s being called) the ‘pentecostalization’ of the Church, as lively and charismatic worship increasingly becomes the norm, even in the Church of England.

Turning to the human search for meaning, we can see this manifesting itself in many ways as well. It may emerge through an intense questioning of faith in all its forms. The work of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens is all part of this quest and ironically it’s *increased* rather than *decreased* discussion about God more generally. However, the search for meaning might come out in a spiritual quest – a search for a life of prayer or inner peace. And yet again it can be found in what might appear to be quite the opposite – a life of action and service from those who’re seeking to reveal God’s Kingdom to people who’re struggling with illness, poverty or a lack of hope. In the epiphany story of the magi searching for the Christ-child we have one instance of a group and individuals engaged on just such a search for *meaning*.

And finally, we come to the intoxication of art and poetry. We know that wine has a powerful effect on the human *body* – the more wine, the greater the effect, up to a point! Art and poetry in all their forms have a great effect on the human *spirit*. They take us to another place emotionally and spiritually. They can be a means of God’s grace and a means of mediating God’s presence – whether that’s music, or painting, or poetry, or other forms of creative endeavour. In that story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee we see Jesus providing more wine than was *needed* and of better quality than was *required*. That action illustrates God’s generosity, and there’s parallel between that act of divine grace and the intoxication of finding God in art and poetry – taking us beyond the mundane aspects of our lives into those moments of enchantment that have always been important to the human spirit.

All of us will have different forms of religious experience; all of us will engage in our quest for meaning in different ways; all of us will seek enchantment in various modes. Some will say that religion is a thing of the past which no longer has any relevance to the 21st century. Such a view seems to me to be a very narrow and partial perspective on our world. And it’s heartening to know there are still many thoughtful people even in sceptical western culture who continue to declare that faith in Christ *and* Christian faith have so much to offer to human *being* human *living* and human *thinking*.

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