

'Core of Christianity'

Homily shared at St Michael's Liberal Catholic Community, Southport, on Sunday 3 July 2011.

I would like to share with you my main thought for today – that the Core of Christianity is Values rather than Beliefs, and that we see this reflected from the very beginnings of Christianity.

You recall that Jesus spoke often about 'living in fullness of life'. This is summed up in two great principles, when Jesus said 'Love God, with all your heart...soul...strength...and mind', and 'Love... neighbour as ...oneself' (Matt 22:36-39). And, in the Beatitudes, moral sayings attributed to Jesus, we see contrasting images of life's commonplace states of being and of great blessings that surprise our expectations (Matt 5: 3-12). The idea of inversion of values lies at the heart of Christian ethics.

The core values of Christian living are still of crucial importance for human well-being – values such as the intrinsic worth of the individual, and caring for the weaker members in society.

The earliest followers called themselves 'The Followers of the Way', and continued to worship for many years after Jesus' death as part of the Jewish synagogue. Jesus' brother James led the group in Jerusalem.

The phrase 'followers of **the Way**' is a very significant clue to how these early followers, the contemporaries of Jesus, understood Jesus and his mission.

Jesus was revered as a stand-out teacher (rabbi) amongst his cohort. Each Rabbi had his particular ideas and individual following. But Jesus had something very different to say about the way people should live and relate both to their God and to others around them.

We can talk glibly about the Gospel. But few take on the discipline of examining what it is that Jesus might actually have said and what might have been added or inferred by later writers, and by people like us down through the years. Our difficulty is that we begin with later theological interpretations, and read these back into the historical Jesus. Thankfully, much of this task is being done for us by contemporary biblical scholars.

And what we learn from this about Jesus and his mission is that:

- Jesus taught a unique vision of God, imagining for people a new state of 'Being', which he called 'the Kingdom of God on earth'
- Jesus taught and embodied this new way of living and relating in the world, as 'the Way'
- Jesus taught that God was god of all people and all creation (not of a select few)
- He spoke of God as intimate to personal experience (contrast the Hebrew idea of God as unknowable and unapproachable)
- Jesus taught that redemption (or 'salvation') was to be found in the here and now, rather than in some future realm (a 'realized eschatology')

- This 'salvation' was about practical 'fullness of life', freeing and liberating people's lives in the now (story of Zacchaeus – Luke 19:2-10)
- Jesus taught and demonstrated radical, unconditional, inclusive human love and compassion as 'the Way' for all people, revealing a new potential in human nature
- Jesus saw 'sin' as an element of choices in life, and 'forgiveness' as a conscious action of reconciliation. He showed people how to forgive and how to seek forgiveness of others.¹
- Jesus established the highest Christian ideal, that 'God is love, and when you live in love, God lives also in you'
- Jesus profoundly disturbed the religious and social culture in which he lived.

So what do we make of this? What speaks to me, as central to a personal understanding of Jesus' mission, is the model of radical, unconditional, inclusive human love and compassion. Why? Because it suggests that Jesus was foremost a social revolutionary within his socio-religious culture, setting before people a new vision of 'Being' and of 'Becoming' and of 'Doing'; and because it gives us a model that is so very different to the way many people in the world experience life even today.

You recall, when Paul spoke of the chief elements of the Gospel, he named 'Faith, Hope and Love, these three, but the greatest ... is Love' (1 Cor. 13:13).

The later writer of Luke's gospel envisaged this new 'state of being' that Jesus spoke of, as a society of individual justice, compassion and liberation from poverty and oppression; a radically egalitarian order to overturn the oppressive hierarchical social order dominated at the time by Rome in which no one was equal.

We know that early Christian communities were largely drawn from the under-classes of society. The soft underbelly of the vast Roman Empire was 80% extreme poverty. Jesus' message of love, compassion and community became their core motivation and way of living. And these people, despite having nothing, and suffering official persecution, or indeed simply because of these things, made it so obvious that the movement grew (a process of organic growth), from a handful of scattered followers to half the population of the Roman Empire. Prolific early Christian author, Tertullian² in *The Apology*, 39.7 (c. 200CE), quotes others as saying 'how these Christians love one another'.

Sociologist Rodney Stark in *The Rise of Christianity* (Univ. of Washington) observes that the most significant contribution of Jesus' teaching was (and arguably *still is*) the radically subversive counter cultural ethic of compassionate mercy. It introduces us to a far larger view of reality than ourselves. We in our western social democracies have absorbed this ethic and wear it like a second skin. But

¹Jesus never spoke in terms of 'original sin'. This doctrine developed by Augustine (354-430CE) won out in the Roman church over Iranaeus' (c.125-202CE) earlier idea of sin as a function of learning and growth (the latter being closer to modern psychology). Its pervasiveness in Western religious thinking, discipline and control has been psychologically damaging to successive generations of individuals.

²Referred to as the 'father of Latin Christianity', and 'founder of Western theology'. Tertullian (150-222CE) in *Adversus Praxeau* was, for example, first to coin the term 'Trinity' and exposit the term as 'three persons, one substance'. He also lamented that in bringing together the canonical Bible, 'the Spirit was chased into a book'.

just how radical and subversive it was in Jesus' day, one cannot even begin to appreciate. The Greek philosopher Plato, in outlining his theories for a Model State, had completely rejected the idea. And in 1st century Roman culture and society, this idea of compassionate mercy was widely viewed as contrary to precepts of justice and an unworthy defect of moral character. It was, by our standards, a harsh and unforgiving world.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that every major religion in every major culture has its equivalent of the 'Mercy Rule'.

So the essential witness of the earliest Christians was about living in loving relationship. We see a similar dynamic today, where in developing countries the church is embracing people who are struggling in the face of political and economic injustice and oppression...while in parts of the world where people are experiencing greater comfort and security, the church is being pushed to the margins of society.

Pushed to the margins, or being invited to a new conversation? Don Cupitt, English founder of the Sea of Faith movement, in *The Meaning of the West: An Apologia for Secular Christianity* suggests that many people have already moved to a form of 'secular Christianity', a logical extension or end-point of Christian development in our social democracies, that reflects people's best instincts, and almost completely embodies and gives expression in society to values and ethics that reflect (and in some areas expand upon) Jesus' life and teaching.

As I said earlier, many of us wear the core message of the Gospel like a second skin – what we do with it is for us as individuals to decide. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, we need to 'be the change we want to see in the world'.

The focus of Jesus' teaching was on 'Being' and on 'Becoming' and about 'Doing'.

The Church's focus on doctrine and right belief *about* Jesus is something that was added later.

Contemporary scholars help us understand how, as Christianity abandoned its Hebrew roots and became a Gentile movement, its cultural outlook, language and expression was influenced and changed by a growing exposure to prevailing classical religions, philosophies and mythologies of the Greco-Roman world.

We see the evidence of this transition in:

- a progressive transformation of the self-identity of Jesus in late 1st century gospel writings³
- centuries of abstract Greek philosophical debate concerning the nature of personhood of Jesus (Christology)⁴
- borrowings of elements of belief, ritual and practice from other religions of the period (Imperial religion and Mithraism in particular)⁵

³ See also, Peter Robinson *Sources of Divinity of Jesus*, July 2008

⁴ See also, Peter Robinson *Jesus of History and Christ of Faith*, March 2009, p 5-8.

⁵ See also, Peter Robinson (ed.) *Attributes of Revered Gods and Humans*, July 2008

In the Hebrew tradition in which Jesus was grounded, God was looked on as uniquely divine, and it was anathema to Hebrew minds to consider a Messiah⁶ or anyone else in this way. The Greco-Roman cultures, religions and mythologies on the other hand, widely attributed supernatural divine status to their many founders, imperial emperors and other worshipped figures. This included attributes of virgin conception, pre-destination, transcendence over death and ascension to another realm.

Christian apologist, Justin Martyr (c. 100-162CE) in his *First Apology*, 21 gives us a brief insight:

- 'He (Jesus) was born of a virgin, accept this in common with what you believe of Perseus' (in Greek classical mythology, Perseus was born of the virgin Danae, conceived by the god Zeus)
- 'When we say...Jesus...was crucified and died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven, we propound nothing different from what you believe regarding those whom you esteem sons of Jupiter' (in classical mythology, Jupiter, supreme god of the Roman pantheon, was father of gods and goddesses Apollo, Diana, Mars and Minerva)

The issue for classical Greek minds was not that people attributed such beliefs, but in attributing such beliefs to someone as low born as Jesus.⁷

It is not surprising that early Christianity applied titles and images to Jesus that reflected the cultural metaphoric language of devotion of the period. This included borrowings from other religions and mythologies, and quite subversively from Imperial theology. The clear, but difficult choice for people, highlighted in a letter from Pliny the Younger to the Emperor at the time (112CE), was which deified 'Son of God' to worship, Caesar ... or Jesus.⁸

The early church historian Eusebius (260-340CE) in his *Historic Ecclesia* (325CE) observed that when in 136CE a Christian church was re-established in Jerusalem, its members were gentiles and its theologies already those of Hellenised Christianity.

There were many philosophical explanations of who Jesus was.⁹

The Arian school (Arius c.274-337CE) taught that God alone was divine; the Antioch (Eastern) school (Nestorius, Theodore, Chrysostom) that Jesus was human and distinct from God yet worthy of divine attribution because of what people saw as God's special presence in and with him; and the Alexandrian (Western) school (Clement, Origin, Athanasius) that Jesus' very essence was divine as it was asserted that God had entered the created realm of earth to live as a man in Jesus.

It is interesting to reflect in this way, on some of the 'Greek' elements of Christianity as we know it.

⁶ Messiah - 'Christ' in Greek. One who was expected to lead and restore Israel's socio-political identity. Many scholars suggest Jesus did not see himself as a messiah in his lifetime. Even if the title was being applied to Jesus in his lifetime, it had no supernatural or divine connotation.

⁷ In the ancient religions, there are stories of 25 or more 'virgin births' and of 16 or more 'resurrected saviours'.

⁸ The title Son of God and other titles attributed to Jesus reflected the cultural language of devotion of the period, later becoming elements of Christian literal belief. For an expanded discussion refer to Peter Robinson *'Jesus of History and Christ of Faith'* March 2009, p 8-9.

⁹ For a concise summary, spanning 2nd – 7th centuries, see also Peter Robinson *'Jesus of History and Christ of Faith'* March 2009, p5-8.

However, I am reminded of Oxford biblical scholar Alister McGrath's observation that the Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with 'Father God...and not the Son'. Jesus always pointed his followers to God, not to himself – even so, where the writer of John's Gospel narrative presents Jesus on the same human level as his followers, with the words 'I am going to my father and your father, my God and your God' (John 20:17). In the same context, Mary Magdalene calls Jesus 'Rabboni', that is to say 'Teacher' (John 20:16). Distinguished New Testament scholar Brandon Scott comments that Mary 'probably got it right'.

In an extreme irony, at the time of Emperor Constantine (Emperor 306-337CE), Jesus, who in his short lifetime had turned the values of the Empire upside down, was invested as the standard bearer of Roman imperialism, his Cross the symbol on the victor standard of Constantine, and the motto 'in this sign...conquer'. The institutional church was changed forever.¹⁰

How does one reconcile a gospel message of radical social redemption characterized by peace, alternative to Empire, life lived in relationship with God and with fellow human kind, and embodying love, joy, compassion, justice, inclusiveness and wholeness, when the images we so often recite and sing are of Jesus as militant leader, his cross as a symbol of war, or Jesus as conquering hero crowned in glory, eternally adored and worshipped? Such images may satisfy an emotional need in people, but are far removed from the way Jesus understood his life, mission and teaching as portrayed to us in the synoptic gospels, and light years away from most people's idea and expression of true Christian spirituality, ethics and values today. A challenge for the church is to re-mythologize, with new stories, new metaphors, in ways that speak to people.

A new cultural paradigm is emerging, focused on 'spiritual wholeness' rather than classical dogma, social action rather than introspective religion. It expresses a deep concern for common humanity, world hunger and poverty, the earth, social justice, and the voiding of deep cultural and social prejudices of past generations. It is close to Jesus' original message of redemption, hope, love, compassion, justice and inclusiveness.¹¹

In the words of Robert Kennedy, 'Each time one of us stands for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against an injustice, a ripple of hope is generated, which with a million other small ripples of hope and daring, builds a river which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and hate'.¹² Look at the way whole generations of people have responded to the spirit of the vision of a Martin Luther King Jr, Gandhi, Mandela, Tutu, Romero or a Mother Teresa.

Our practical redemption comes from being enabled to live fully, to love wastefully and serve extravagantly each moment of each day, inspired by the sacrificial love and compassion of Jesus. Jesus, who so embodied and allowed the Spirit of God to infuse, motivate and direct his life, that people saw in him what they felt to be the very essence and meaning of God.

¹⁰ Under Emperor Constantine, the institutional church gained legal status (Edict of Milan 313CE), but quickly became a religion of rigid belief, conformism, and an arm of State. The Church, today, is still coming to terms with issues of power and control, and the rise of individual conscience and religious expression.

¹¹ For a discussion on this, and how the Church might become more engaged with people in today's society, see Peter Robinson 'Future Church- Discussion Paper' January 2009.

¹² Robert Kennedy, address to National Union of South African students 1966.

The spirit of Jesus is 'alive' on the streets.¹³

I have a view that Christian faith is a journey to be lived, not a set of propositions to be believed – or put another way, in the words of Canadian Gretta Vosper, the way we live is (as or) more important than what we believe.

Peter Robinson

July 2011

¹³For example, Bill Maher's monologue in response to Bin Laden's death, viral on Facebook <http://youtu.be/oOqycchC8Hc>