

WHY NOT BE A CHRISTIAN?

Acts 17:22-31 and John 14: 15-21

Why not be a Christian? That's not meant as an invitation or a challenge: I take it as read that those of you here this morning already think of yourselves as Christian, and find at least some of the packages called Christianity and Methodism to be attractive. But undeniably thousands, even millions of our fellow countrymen and women do not: the pews of our churches are increasingly empty and there is a seemingly inexorable rise in the number of people who want to jump on the anti-Christian bandwagon.

And so this week I jumped on the Internet and searched for "Why nor be a Christian?" An amazing array of websites popped up, including a number of sites calling themselves "The Secular Web". As almost all of the web is secular, in other words not dedicated to religion, I wouldn't have thought the adjective "secular" was really necessary; but these are people who like to define themselves by what they are not, by the very religion they despise. "The top 3 reasons why people hate Christians" are outlined on one site; "the top 10 reasons to not be Christian" cry out from another site – clearly from people who are as anti-grammar as they are anti-God. There are plenty more, but they seem to have much in common, and their arguments boil down to two things:

1. Christians are just not very nice people: the top three reasons to hate Christians are that they are hypocritical, judgmental and they hate Atheists.
2. The Christian God is just not credible: the top ten reasons not to be Christian concern science, evolution, wars, the Bible, divine intervention and so on.

The more of this stuff I read, the more I am drawn to two conclusions of my own. Firstly, that the image of Christians and Christianity that they present and castigate is a parody, a pale shadow of what people would encounter if they happened to walk through the doors of this church or many others. Secondly, if that parody were even vaguely accurate, I for one would be outside casting my own stones, rather than standing here trying to uphold, spread and deepen faith in Jesus. I'm sure many of you would count yourselves in the same boat.

So what is to be done? There's no better place to start than the lectionary readings for today. Any serious engagement with them will tend to steer Christians away from the hypocritical, judgmental, hateful parody that atheists despise, while at the same time steering us towards a concept of God that is at once more credible and more amenable.

Let's start with the reading from John's gospel. There is no getting away from the fact that we are here presented with an in/out paradigm. The parody is simple: those who are in are saved; those who are out are damned. And from there it is but a short step towards exclusive faith communities with sign-on-the-dotted-line credentials, and onwards to the kind of hypocrisy and judgmentalism that is so widely disparaged. But read this passage more carefully and something quite different emerges. Those who are "in" are characterized four times (v 15, 21, 23, 28) as those who love Jesus; and they are contrasted four times with "the world" (v 17, 19, 27, 30).

So we clearly have two groups, one good and one bad, one "in" and one "out". But notice how the good group, the in-crowd is presented. Every time there is a condition: "**if** you love me". And what this does is to crack open the confines of an exclusive club. It's rather like the Royal & Ancient saying "if your golf handicap is under 2 you may join" for suddenly the doors of a

bastion of male chauvinism would be thrown wide open and women could go marching through. Likewise Jesus' "if" is not a restriction but an invitation. His club is open to all.

Yet there is, undeniably, a condition. What is it? It is spelt out very clearly in v21 and 23: love me and you obey my commandments; obey my commandments and you will love me. It is an ethical imperative; it's about how we live; about whether, in all that we say and do, we love God and love neighbour; it's about the pursuit of justice and peace, integrity and solidarity – all the things that Jesus stood for.

Within this passage three sets of words summarise and characterise the love of Jesus. These words are: spirit of truth, *agape* (charity) and *shalom* (peace). Each of these is a term used by people of all faiths and none; each of these is attractive, inclusive, vibrant and thoroughly modern. Even our online atheist friends might be persuaded by them; and they are much more likely to be persuaded if we who call ourselves Christian were to display in our daily lives the *shalom*, the *agape*, the spirit of truth that we confess to know in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Turning next to the reading from Acts, we encounter a speech of Paul's that is both similar to many others and yet distinctive. Its structure and style is classic apologetics, but at Areopagus Paul consciously presents God in philosophical rather than historical terms. If you read Karen Armstrong's best-selling book, "A History of God" you will discover that these two concepts run side-by-side throughout the three great Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The historical approach, sometimes called *supernatural theism*, conceives of God as a person-like being who acts in history. The philosophical approach, also known as *panentheism*, imagines God as an all-encompassing spirit in whom all that is has its being. At the Areopagus Paul presents his message entirely in this second manner, engaging with the philosophical mindset of this Greek audience.

Was it a success? Paul himself obviously thought not for, in his own words, he sought to preach nothing but Christ crucified during his next preaching appointment in Corinth. Clearly he was stung by what Luke tells us in Acts was a mocking and scoffing response. And yet ... A commentary that I read this week points out that throughout Paul's journeys he receives a divided response of acceptance and rejection, but in this passage there is a subtle reversal of order: Luke first draws attention to the mockers, but then mentions those who wanted to know more, and finally those named and unnamed who believed. The commentary concludes that this account actually emphasises Paul's success in the cultural capital of Greece.

This is **not** an abstruse matter merely of interest to scholars. It has shaped much of the history of Christianity and has informed the dominant paradigm for evangelism over recent centuries in particular. Paul's discomfort with the mocking he received in Athens led him to emphasise supernatural theism and never again to speak of the God in whom we live and move and have our being. But today it is this same theism, this concept of God as a supernatural person, the view that God intervenes in the world from on high or "out there", that it is to this same pre-existing deity that we plead in prayer ... it is precisely this historical concept of God that has fallen into disrepute with so many scientifically-educated, 21st century people. Oh, for us to find again the God who is Spirit of Truth in, through, behind, beyond all things. Oh for us to rediscover the God that spoke so powerfully through Paul in Athens and persuaded Dionysius and Damaris and others beside.

The reality, as both Paul and Jesus found, is that religious truth divides people into two camps. There are “those who love Jesus” and “the world”; there are mockers and there are converts. That will always be the case, although like the two camps of the current Scottish Referendum debate, respectful dialogue should always be possible, always be sought. To my mind respectful dialogue in the Christian referendum will be much more likely if we lay hold of that within our tradition that is panentheistic and if we fully commit to that ethical imperative of agape and shalom of which Jesus spoke. There will still be two camps, whatever we say or do, but just possibly such a change of emphasis will appeal to more hearts and minds, and persuade more people to vote YES for Jesus.

Stirling, 25th May 2014