

WAKE UP AND STRENGTHEN WHAT REMAINS

PREACHER : The Very Rev'd Adrian Newman, Dean

Sunday, November 19th 2006

Sung Eucharist : 10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

Over twenty years ago an American by the wonderful name of Emo Phillips told a joke which last year was voted "Best religious joke ever". I have anglicised it slightly and shortened it considerably. It goes like this:

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump. I ran over and said: "Stop. Don't do it."

"Why shouldn't I? Nobody loves me" he said.

"God loves you" I said. "Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes."

I said, "Me too. Are you Christian or Buddhist?" "Christian."

"Me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "Protestant."

"Me too. Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?" "Baptist."

"Wow. Me too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

"Baptist Church of God."

"Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Me too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

He said: "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915."

I said: "Die, heretic scum," and pushed him off.

It's funny, because it cuts a bit too close to the truth – which is that Christianity has done a superb job of shooting itself in the foot with the bullets of bigotry and prejudice down the years. Little wonder that, along with politics, religion has become the great subject that shall not be talked about.

And yet, if this is true, what is going on at the moment? For I can't think of another period in my lifetime, and perhaps not in the lifetime of anyone present in the Cathedral this morning, when religious faith was more of a talking point in contemporary society.

Take these stories from the newspaper headlines over the past couple of weeks. Everywhere you look religious faith is in the news.

Yesterday there was the story about 3 university Christian Unions that have been closed down by their universities, concerned at their exclusivist tendencies.

There have been stories about the wearing of the Muslim veil or a Christian cross at work. There's been the debate about possibility of quotas in faith schools. We have seen the launch of Gordon Brown's immunisation bonds, with the first five sales going to the five major world faith groups.

We've had the inclusion of creationist ideas in a scientific curriculum. There has been the moral debate over stem cells, and the death penalty. We have heard about the BNP's views on Islam.

We've had a couple of light-hearted items about the secular local authorities desire to change Christmas to Winterval. There have been Sunday parking charges affecting the churches in Plymouth. Tom Cruise's marriage to Katie Holmes – Scientology and Catholicism.

The head of the British Army, a very committed Christian, has given us his views on the war in Iraq. The Muslim Council of Britain decided to boycott the Holocaust Memorial Day. Pagans and Catholics clashed in Glastonbury. There's even been a small story about the £50m needed to save a certain minor cathedral, down the road from us, from crumbling into the Kent chalk.

It doesn't take a genius to work out that, after generations of being progressively side-lined by an increasingly secular society, faith and religion are back on the front pages. And this extraordinary cultural shift has got up the noses of the atheists and secularists who would prefer religion to be consigned to a small column on page 17, thank you very much. Better still to have died a quiet death.

Learned articles appear on the dangers of religious belief. The President of the National Secular Society is wheeled out to have a moan on a regular basis. And now the ultimate weapon in the fight against religious faith has been unleashed. Richard Dawkins has published another book.

As an aside I have started reading *The God Delusion*. I'm thirty pages into it and I agree with every word so far. So I'm not sure what's happening. Either I'm losing my religion or he's discovering his. Or, the distance between us is not as great as secular atheists like to think.

The point I want to make is very simple. Religion, if it ever went away, is back. Whether or not this is good news for the Church remains to be seen, but the opportunity is there for something very positive to be forged from the pressure of these cultural tectonic plates crunching together.

The secret to the rebirth of the Church as an arena for human flourishing is to be found in a little phrase that jumped out at me from a reading during a very quiet Matins service ten days ago. It's the words of an angel to the church in Sardis, one of the seven churches singled out in the book of Revelation.

The phrase that jumped off the page for me was this. **Wake up and strengthen what remains.** I think this is a message to anyone who wants to rediscover the power of Christian faith in their lives.

A famous mystic, now sadly dead, called Tony de Mello once said that the spiritual lethargy in the modern world was akin to being asleep. And coming alive to God was like waking up. Wake up and strengthen what remains.

I almost get the sense that the words "wake up" are meant to be accompanied by a bucket of cold water. Get real. Christianity is everything or it is nothing. There are no half measures in this faith that Christ came to bring.

Today's Baptisms are a case in point. It's tempting to go to a Church of England Baptism and feel that it's a nice little ceremony with babies and water. But if you go back to its roots you find out just how wrong you can be. It is a frightening piece of drama.

When the first Christians wanted to find a way of symbolising what it meant for someone to forsake their old way of life and follow the new faith of Jesus Christ, they searched for a ceremony to express dying to their past and being reborn to something completely new. Baptism seemed perfect because it was primevally the re-enactment of a death. It was meant to be powerful, animalistic, scary. Take a convert to Christianity, hold them under water in a river, take them almost to the point of suffocation then release them above the water, gasping for breath, sucking in the air. Why? Because becoming a Christian was serious death unto life business. Wake up. Breathe again. Suck in the life-giving breath of God's spirit.

I suppose I ought to mention today's readings. Rather like your parents, you can't choose the daily Lectionary readings. They're given and you have to live with them. When I first saw the two readings for today, my heart sank. They're all about the end of the world. Judgement. Apocalypse now.

Oh just perfect for a baptism, I thought to myself. But in the light of everything else I've said this morning, maybe they're not so bad after all. Because when the Bible talks about the end of the world it is a wake up call that things are getting serious. Wake up, take stock of what's going on. Don't let your faith drift down the river of life. Somewhere around the bend of the river there's a big drop, or some rapids, and you need to be alert.

So, nothing too profound from me this morning. Is there ever? Just a reminder that, in a world that's rediscovering its interest in religion, faith may be back on the national agenda but if it is to make a difference in our lives then we have to wake up and strengthen what remains. So, when in a few minutes time, the parents make their promises on behalf of Marcus and Luke, why not make their renewed act of commitment yours as well. It really does beat pushing each other off bridges.