

SERMON AT PENTECOST 4:6:2017-06-04: GEOFF CHADWICK

THE SPIRIT AND PR

Recently all the students in the secondary school here have been asked to answer the following question on a test:

“From what you have been learning in class or from your own life, give 2 examples of how religion has influenced history. Explain why you think this influence has been good or bad.”

I have just finished marking about 200 of these answers and the answers have concerned me. Despite our efforts at this school to point out the healthy benefits of religion or faith, the majority of answers have been in the negative. For the most part my adolescent students have told me that religion is “bad” or “evil.”

On top of the “bad or evil” list are the following:

- ISIS
- The Nazis killing Jews
- Being forced to believe stuff that’s not scientifically proven
- Creating wars.

On the “good” side, and there were few examples were:

- Giving people hope when life is difficult.
- Creating a church where my old grandma can go to meet friends.

Of the 200 answers I recall only one where the student said religion started schools where kids could get a good education. So much for the Grammar School!

Now I don't expect 13 – 14 year olds to have a well-formed understanding of world history or world politics, but their comments concern me greatly. Now doubt they have confused the two in their answers, but I still worry why religion is viewed so negatively and why the good works of faith are so under recognised?

Those good things such as:

- Feeding the hungry
- Caring for the sick
- Sheltering the homeless
- Fostering the arts
- Brokering peace
- Creating community?

But I should not be surprised. How often have we heard adults and parents of these children complain that most wars have been started by religion? How often in our media do we hear yet another atrocity perpetrated by an extremist religious group?

To be fair if we look at world history and world religions superficially we can easily reach the conclusion that religion and war-mongering go hand in hand. Yes there were the crusades. Yes the Catholics and the Protestants fought bitterly. Yes Sunni and Shi'ite Moslems disagree with one another, and it is true that India divided itself into two nations on the basis of religious identity. But we must be careful – politics was never far away in each of these examples. Then there are those who would champion Atheism as a better option than Religion. But Atheism too, is not innocent of war mongering. Under Stalin

the official Atheistic State of the USSR executed over 1 million of its citizens. War, it seems, is part of the human condition and is not simply a phenomenon of religion.

Curiously, if we look at the early church we see it growing in the midst of a war-like community. Whilst the general population was forced to proclaim "Caesar is Lord" under duress, Christians chose another way. "Jesus is Lord" was their cry. Under this chant, people of different cultures, classes, and social standing became unlikely friends. Under this chant widows found care, money was raised for the poor, and health was brought to the ill. This "new way" – "the way" was so different from the hardened way of the world that it grew through curiosity. The Gospel, was indeed, *good news to the poor*.

None of this, however, was possible without the active work of God's Spirit. In the midst of all the difficulties, the confusions, and misunderstandings, faith in Jesus prevailed. But this was not the result of some simple blind-stobborn stoicism of the people. (Well except Paul maybe!) No the Spirit of God was at work. Hearts of stone had become hearts of flesh. (Even Paul!)

Yet now at the beginning of the 21st Century I see hearts hardened against faith. My students test answers are merely reflection of a broader community perception. Hearts are hardened against religion.

This worries me and pains me. I worry because the kinder side of religion is being ignored and it pains me because my belief in Jesus has formed my very being in many ways. All I long

for in art, community, compassion and justice springs from my nurturing in Jesus. Without this I wonder, sometimes, who I might be.

So I think Christianity, if not, religion in general, is suffering from a Public Relations disaster. The good that we do, and the love that we show in the name of Jesus is not being seen. As Anglicans, we have long thought that our "good works" would point to the "faith that is in us" and that we wouldn't need to say too much about Jesus. This also spared us the embarrassment of introducing the taboo subject of religion into our conversations. I love this idea but I'm not so sure that it works. Somehow, I think we need to reclaim the good that we do, and be prepared to proclaim that we do it because Jesus' love compels us! Just how we do that without embarrassing ourselves or falling into the trap of too much religious zeal is not so clear, but try we must. Somehow Wars, ISIS, etc must be overshadowed by hope, grandma's community, compassion, art and prayer.

It's time for hardened hearts to be softened.

Now there's a danger here. The early theologian Pelagius (AD 400s) upon seeing the corruption and wickedness of Rome, came to the conclusion that if human beings could try harder they could solve the problems (*incidentally* he became an ascetic!). Jesus, the ultimate example of goodness would inspire us and with the careful fostering of faith all could be made well. I'm attracted to this idea (now known as Pelagianism) to a certain extent, as it expresses an optimistic view of humanity. Nevertheless, Saint Augustine, arguing otherwise (and the church has considered Pelagianism a heresy ever since), suggested that there has been a systemic evil in the world since the beginning. This evil is

too complex for humans to deal with on their own strength. That is why we need a saviour. Without God, we are lost – human optimism can get us so far, but beyond that we need the strength and wisdom of a higher being. For us, this Pentecost we are glad to receive the Holy Spirit as this gift. On our own we cannot soften our own hardened hearts or even the hearts of the hardened world, but with the Spirit's help more is possible than we may realise.

In the meantime, let us be agents of good PR for God. Pelagius would have us do what we can but Augustine will remind us to call on our saviour.

As I am fond of saying: "When it comes to God, I'm not in management but I am in PR."

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

From Wikipedia 3/6/2017

Pelagius was born about 354-360. He is said by his contemporaries, such as Augustine of Hippo, Prosper of Aquitaine, Marius Mercator, and Paul Orosius, to have been of British origin.^[4] Jerome apparently thought that Pelagius was Irish, suggesting that he was "stuffed with Irish porridge" (*Scotorum pulibus praegravatus*).^[5] Tall in stature and portly in appearance, Pelagius was highly educated. He spoke and wrote Latin and Greek with great fluency and was well versed in theology.

Pelagius became better known around 380 when he moved to Rome.^[6] There he enjoyed a reputation of austerity; he also corresponded with St. Paulinus of Nola.^[7] Pelagius became concerned about the moral laxity of society. He blamed this laxity on the theology of divine grace preached by Augustine, among others. He began to teach a very strict, rigid moralism, emphasizing a natural, innate human ability to attain salvation.^[8]

When Alaric sacked Rome in 410, Pelagius and his follower Caelestius fled to Carthage, where he continued his work.^[6] By 415, he was in Jerusalem.

Stalin had nearly a million of his own citizens executed, beginning in the 1930s. Millions more fell victim to forced labor, deportation, famine, massacres, and detention and interrogation by Stalin's henchmen.

<http://news.stanford.edu/2010/09/23/naimark-stalin-genocide-092310/>
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