

In the Mix

‘Here in a foreign land, how can we sing about the Lord?’ Ps 135:4

John Henderson, 26 August 2015

For 1700 years now, since the 3rd century AD, Christianity has played a major role in shaping the Western world.

Over those years the Christian church has shaped and even dictated people’s attitudes on just about everything: creation, humanity, society, class, status, money, marriage, sexuality, education, work, death, the purpose of life, to name just a few. We can’t avoid its legacy. The church has defined what sin is, convicted people of evil, and offered salvation in various forms. Along the way it inherited the Roman Empire, engaged in wars, beheaded or burned its opponents at the stake, and yet paradoxically the church has also been a force for peace and goodwill. To those Christians who have gone before us we owe the message of the gospel.

Sometimes, despite its immense worldly power and influence, the church did manage to remain faithful to that gospel. But as we know, there too many times when through politics, corruption, greed, or just plain stupidity, the church and its leaders conveniently invented new things. Crusades, indulgences, and witch-hunts are hardly activities that Jesus would ask of his church.

It’s no surprise then, that if we stop to think about it, we can find the church somewhat confusing.

For good or for ill the Church’s pervasive influence over many centuries has given us a certain flavour. We live it and breathe it. It’s built into the very fibre of our society, our ethics, and our values. It’s so much a part of us that we very often fail to see its influence for what it is. What else, for instance, is the current debate on gay marriage, but a debate about the supposedly Christian values we have inherited? And not even the Christians can agree about it! The church has only become involved in marriage for the last 1,000 years in the West. That sounds like a long time, but for the first thousand years the church left the legalities of marriage well alone.

So the residue of Christian influence is clear, whatever people’s connection or lack of connection with the church itself.

Now today I assume I am talking to a room where the majority of us do have some kind of connection with the church that goes beyond the day-to-day affairs school in which you work. I am assuming that you are a group in which it does matter how we live our faith. If I am correct in that, then you will also have positions or views on things concerning the church – whether it allows women and men equal status, for instance. What it should say about marriage. How it responds to the refugee crisis. Does it practice what it preaches? Can it meet the needs of the modern age?

When Neville asked me to speak today, he suggested a verse from Psalm 137: ‘Here in a foreign land, how can we sing about the Lord?’ We who regard ourselves as Christians might feel that we have now been left out of the loop. We might be grieving what we have lost. We are in a foreign place where we don’t belong. The influence of the church, and with it Christianity, seems to be on the wane. Many of those among whom we work—students and staff—give it little heed. The headlines are often bad – sexual abuse, corruption, and moral turpitude. If you belong to a local congregation, chances are it isn’t in growth mode.

Now rather startlingly, the Contemporary English Version of the Bible gives Psalm 137 the heading, ‘A prayer for revenge’. The Israelites have been faithless and so God has made them slaves of Babylon. They feel that they don’t deserve it. In their captivity they plan to pay back the rough deal they have received and then some. Tragically, the Psalm ends with the repugnant verse, ‘May the Lord bless everyone who beats your children against the rocks!’ How could you sing the traditional ‘Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’ after that line?

And yet that is Scripture! Far from always being comforting, and offering us a soft road in Jesus, when you read it as it is, it frequently confronts, shocks, unsettles, and disturbs us. Just like the church does. Scripture and the church both carry the divine message of hope and salvation, but they can also turn aside to tell us a rugged, unpleasant, and frequently mean spirited journey of human despair, meanness, and loss of faith. It's not a simple moral tale of right and wrong. There are no Cinderella endings. It's all far more realistic than that.

Perversely, this gritty Biblical realism gives me hope. God did not drop a textbook from the sky. He did not found the perfect society on earth. I don't think he intends ever to do so. Contrary to the defiant or naïve optimism of the 20th century, the worst century for war and death the world had ever known, humans are not relentlessly progressing to nirvana on earth. That's a fallacy. Politically and socially in the West maybe Christianity has had its day in the sun. History will decide, but right now it is still a massive force in our society. It's not over yet, whatever the critics might say.

All the time, whether in favour or out of favour, the kingdom of God has been born in the hearts of believers: fallible, sinful, needy, baptised believers. The church on earth is no more, and no less, than the sum of its parts. Your ministry will likewise be mixed with the good and the bad. There will be things of which you are justly proud, and other things you would rather not mention. God works with us, just as we are and where we are, not with who we aren't. If you're waiting to be perfect to be a Christian, or if you expect others to be perfect before you will call them Christian, or if you think the church has to be perfect before you will call it Christian, or if you are waiting for circumstances to improve sufficiently, then you're going to wait an eternity.

Yes, we are in a foreign land, and God knows it's not everything we want it to be. We are 'in the mix', as this conference theme says. And that's right where we need to be—that's where Jesus is, doing his work. He was not born into a perfect world. His world was the political, religious, cultural, and sexual melting pot of Galilee, a place at the crossroads of civilisation. It was occupied by the Roman Empire, religion had become stale and self-righteous, and the people were crying out for real leadership. You would have thought it was all coming to an end, but God brought a new beginning.

There is no need to be fearful about the changes happening in our society, or in our lives. It's nothing out of the ordinary. It's just life. God is still there in front of us and beside us. His rescue and his gospel still meet us right where we are. Where else, after all, would we expect our God to be?