

Trinity 14 2023 - A Christian Country?

Ezekiel 33 vv 7-11 p864, Romans 13 vv 8-14 p1140, Matthew 18 vv 15-20 p985

According to a recent survey, commissioned by and published in the “Times” newspaper, three quarters of Church of England clergy believe that Britain can no longer be described as a Christian country. The evidential validity of this survey has been called into question. Five thousand clergy were randomly selected and invited to take part and only 1200 responded – about 6% of the Church’s active clergy. Those who did respond may have had a particular axe to grind and, therefore, be unrepresentative of the clergy as a whole. Nevertheless, three quarters is a large proportion of those clergy who did respond and that number was widely reported in a number of news media. Columnists expressed their own views – sometimes forcibly and the general public were given the opportunity to come to their own conclusions. One regular contributor to the “Times” strongly hinted that, if Britain is no longer a Christian country, the clergy have only themselves to blame.

I was one of those clergy who took part in the survey, not so much because I have an axe to grind as because I rather enjoy being asked my opinions. To be honest, I can’t remember how I responded to the question about whether England is a Christian country. The answer would depend on what you mean by a Christian country and that is harder to define than would at first appear.

Is a Christian country a nation in which everybody, or at least nearly everybody, is good? Was there ever a time when all or most English people always acted like Jesus? In our epistle reading, St Paul describes how we ought to live as Christians: (Romans 13) ⁸ *Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.*

⁹ *For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*

¹⁰ *Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.* Has there ever been a time when most English people have followed the example of Jesus and lived in the way that Paul says we should? Has there ever been a time when any of us, you or I even, could claim to have fulfilled God’s Law in this way? Only Jesus has fulfilled the Law by totally loving His neighbour as Himself.

I spoke last week about becoming and being a Christian as a metamorphosis. It’s not a matter of nice people becoming a bit nicer; it’s the conversion of sinners into saints. The frog spawn hatches. The tadpoles grow legs, change shape and become carnivores instead of vegetarians. When their metamorphosis is complete, they get out of the pond and live the fullness of life into which their DNA programmed them to grow. They become what they were always meant to be, frogs! If you don’t fancy being a frog, how about being a butterfly?

Being a Christian is a metamorphosis. We begin as sinners, though made in the image of God, and we develop over time, directed by the Spirit of God Who dwells in us, until we fulfil our destiny as the children of God, but the process is only complete at the end of our life on earth. Some of us are more like Jesus than others, but none of us will exactly resemble Him until, by His grace, we get to Heaven.

So there never has been a Christian nation on earth. The good and the evil, the wheat and the tares, grow together until the final harvest.

If we can't define a Christian nation as one in which people always act as Christians, can we say that a Christian country is one in which most people believe in God in Jesus Christ? Probably, but of course we don't know how many people believe in Jesus. We may know those who claim to be Christians, but only God knows what is truly in the heart of a man or a woman or a child. It's possible that some people are Christians without even knowing it and that other people who think that they are Christians in fact are not. We pray: *that all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life*, an interesting prayer.

So I don't feel able to say that Britain either is or is no longer a Christian country (if it ever was) on the basis of the works people perform or the faith they profess. God is the judge and He alone.

We can say, however, that a much larger proportion of the population engaged with the Church in the past than they do today. Not so very long ago, nearly all babies were christened, most people had a Christian funeral and the majority of weddings took place in Church. Far more people went to Church in days gone by – though certainly not everyone. According to the 1851 census, just over 60% of the population were in Church on census Sunday. So four in ten were not. In the 1950s, considerable numbers of children still attended Sunday School, even if their parents were not regular churchgoers. Sending the children to Sunday School was one way for parents to get a bit of peace in the days before computer games! In many families, there were family prayers, even if none of the family went to Church very often. Praying daily for friends and family members, especially those not seen very often, is an important way of keeping the family together and strengthening the bonds between people. Religious Education in schools used to be specifically Christian Education. It was when I was at school. On official forms, most people described themselves as *Church of England*. How much this meant to individuals only God knows. What I do know is that attending Church for whatever reason, praying with your children, educating them in the facts of the Gospel, provides people with the opportunity to come to know Jesus and to put their faith in Him. *How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?* Our secular life style, in which a tiny proportion of the population take part in public worship regularly and frequently, prayers are seldom said together and children are not told about Jesus denies this generation the knowledge they need in order to make the most important decision of their lives – whether or not to follow Jesus.

It does matter that people no longer go regularly to Church or meet for worship in any form. Jesus said, *Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*. What a blessing we deprive ourselves of if we never meet together in His Name.

In respect of shared worship and a common religious education, Britain is definitely less of a Christian country than it used to be.

It was also the case that, at least nominally, we were governed in accordance with Christian principles. Sunday was a day of rest. The Church's contribution to national debates on such subjects as poverty, defence, welfare, sexual ethics, health care and the care of the dying was respected until relatively recently in a way in which it is not now.

In that sense also, Britain is less of a Christian country than it used to be.

How much of this can be blamed on us clergy? Like the prophet Ezekiel in our Old Testament lesson, we are God's spokesmen. If we preach the Word and people pay no attention, the disasters which ensue are wholly their fault. But if the country goes to the dogs, if individual lives go to the dogs, because we clergy have failed to warn them of the consequences which follow from rejecting God's perfect law of love, the blame is ours too. It is a heavy burden of responsibility on us to discern what God is saying today to the Church and to the world and to proclaim His Word in such a manner that people will have the best opportunity possible to hear God's Word, to understand it and to apply it in their daily lives.

But this is far from wholly the responsibility of the clergy. It is the burden of the whole Church to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to all humanity. We need the practical support of the laity. We also need your prayers. But you too have the responsibility to demonstrate the love of God in the world, to share the faith with those who do not as yet know the Gospel. This we do, clergy and lay people alike, by what we say and do, but, above all by what we are, God's people in the world.

I'm sure all of us would wish Britain to be a Christian nation. That being the case, what are we going to do about it?