

Ash Wednesday

A little while ago, a young woman told me that she never read a book if she could help it. She had “A” levels and was going to university; so I was a bit taken aback. I love books and I would expect any educated person to do the same. Maybe that view is a bit old fashioned in our multi media age. Pictures and sound are powerful media whether for education or entertainment and have become increasingly freely available via all sorts of electronic gadgetry from Marconi’s radio and Edison’s phonograph down to the present day. In fact one school adopted the motto *audio, video, disco*, which for non-Latin scholars means, *I hear, I see, I learn*.

We live in a world in which people enjoy themselves, learn and express themselves through a wide range of media in addition to the spoken and written word. For a lot of people, books are boring and so are sermons and lectures.

The Church of England, on the other hand, is a very literate body. Our separation from Rome was part of the Protestant Reformation, the rediscovery of the Bible, the Word of God, as a primary resource for Christian doctrine, understanding and experience. The Reformation was more or less contemporary with the invention of printing and the spread of literacy. These three phenomena fed on one another. The increased availability of books made it worth learning to read, while, the more readers there were, the more sense it made to print books. This media revolution disseminated the ideas of the reformers and they, in turn, promoted both printing and education so that ordinary people could have direct access to the Bible, to prayer books and to other devotional material. Reading, writing and reason went closely together.

The classical reformers had a very reasoned approach to the Bible and to life in general. Especially in the Church of England, whose separation from Rome was largely originated by scholars from Cambridge University, the word, written and spoken, was highly valued. The Book of Common Prayer is packed with instruction for the people, whether in the form of direct exhortations or included in the words of the prayers and praises themselves. If you attend Morning Prayer every day you will never forget that God is the author of peace and lover of concord, that our eternal life depends on knowing him and that his service is perfect freedom. We have strict rules about the texts we are allowed to use in public worship because, for Anglicans more than most, our official beliefs are expressed in the words of our prayer books. *Lex credendi est lex orandi* – the rule of faith is the rule of prayer – is an extremely old saying, but we Anglicans have made it very much our own.

Henry VIII’s archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, intended that the Book of Common Prayer should open up the faith to the common people, a great improvement on Latin, but it is not an easy book to understand. The Alternative Service Book of 1980 is not much simpler. I remember reading that its language was at the level which would be expected of “A” level students and Common Worship is much the same.

Mediaeval Catholicism had been much more multi-media. Churches were richly painted and over flowed with altars and statues. Church music became increasingly complex. Candles

and incense were regularly used. There was ashing on Ash Wednesday, palm crosses on Palm Sunday and foot washing on Maundy Thursday, and there were mystery plays, pilgrimages and holy relics. There was so much to do, to see, to hear, to touch in the Mediaeval Church and it all became suspect at the Reformation. Was it empty ritual? Was it based on superstition? Was it irrational? Did it encourage people to rely on their own efforts, rather than trusting in faith alone? Churches were whitewashed and statues removed; services were reduced to reading prayers and the Bible and preaching and maybe some music, though the Church of England did not rediscover hymn singing for a couple of hundred years.

The Reformation mutated into the Enlightenment. Reason became everything. Faith ceased to be distinguished from superstition. Everything was to be based on the evidence of our senses and rational deliberation thereon. Science, rather than religion, was the only certainty and what was uncertain was not worth worrying about.

This approach, based on science and reason, has been extremely fruitful in many areas of life – improvements to agriculture, industrialisation, with its accompanying prosperity, and science based medicine to name but three. Even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, people recognised its limitations. Keats pointed out that, when you have explained the rainbow as water droplets refracting white light into seven bands of light, each with its own specific wavelength, you have not said anything about what the experience of seeing a rainbow means to most people. Science and reason have very little useful to say about beauty, wonder, faith and love, which, in the experience of millions of people, are the most important things in life.

The Romantic Movement rebelled against the tyranny of Reason in poetry, painting and music. In the nineteenth century Church of England, a similar spirit attempted to recover the ceremony and traditions of the Mediaeval Church (which of course had never gone away in Roman Catholicism). High churches revived mediaeval customs or imported them from overseas. Unfortunately, there was widespread suspicion of what was called Ritualism. It looked like a sell out to Rome and this was not only a matter of concern about doctrine. The Roman Catholic powers of Europe were our traditional enemies. There were patriotic as well as theological reasons for being suspicious of Rome.

Now, however, post-modernism has somewhat dethroned Reason from her throne. There is much less certainty even in Science. It is widely recognised that there are emotional and spiritual values just as valid as any scientific theory. There is a thirst for spirituality, but, by and large, young people are not turning to the churches for answers. In a world in which people expect to receive information and to experience emotions through a whole variety of media – TV and radio, music, the internet, instantly transmissible pictures, dance, the scent of joss sticks, even exotically flavoured food, traditional protestant churches continue to attempt to mediate spiritual values mainly through words written and spoken.

In this context, Proclaiming the Faith Afresh, many very protestant churches are rediscovering the use of candles and incense and ceremonies such as ashing as well as importing wholly new multimedia ideas from contemporary culture.

Obviously, we do not want to repeat the errors of the Middle Ages, but can we see how the ways in which the Church mediated the faith to a pre-literate culture might be relevant to us in what is perhaps becoming a post-literate society?

Look at Lent. Modern people do fast. Nearly everybody is at some time on a diet. The Enlightenment pursuit of Reason has born fruit in providing us with food in excess. So many of us are fat and some obese. But, looking at our Old Testament Lesson, is this the kind of fast that pleases God? Is it religious at all?

Some people speak of their bodies as a temple and look after them accordingly, but a temple to what? A temple is a house for God. We Christians believe that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. I think Christians ought to take some care over their physical health. Otherwise we are less fit to do the Lord's work and might unnecessarily become a burden on other people. Keeping our bodies as a temple meet for God is, however, for Christians, much more a moral question. Do we use our hands to help other people or to harm them? Do we speak the truth or spread lies? Do we walk in the paths of righteousness? We endeavour to make ourselves fit dwelling places for God.

But what about those people who don't believe in God but refer to their bodies as a temple and go on and on about diet and exercise and beauty treatments. If they don't believe in God, who indwells their temple? Is their body not so much a temple as an idol?

To quote our Old Testament reading, the fast that pleases God is *to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke, and deal your bread to the hungry, and bring the outcast poor into your house.* That kind of fasting is not an empty ritual, superstition or self-indulgence. It is God's Will for His people.

Then ashes. If you are like me, you have scruples about applying ashes on Ash Wednesday. Our Gospel reading tells us not to disfigure our faces when we fast, to appear unto men to fast, because that would be our reward. In some cultures you might be admired for fasting and so there would be the temptation to make a display of fasting in the hope of advancing your status. I doubt if that is much of a problem in contemporary Britain. Most people you meet won't recognise that the ashes on your forehead are a sign that you've been to church today. If they do realise what they mean, they'll either be fellow Christians, who will be delighted to enjoy your fellowship, or unbelievers who will be genuinely curious or perhaps scornful. Either way, the ashes on your forehead are a witness to what you believe. So I think we can once more freely make use of ashes as a symbol on Ash Wednesday, without fear of self-aggrandisement.

They symbolise the fact that we are all going to die, a fact which our culture tries to pretend isn't true. People seem to believe that they will live for ever if they adopt a healthy life style. Death is not talked about. It is an embarrassment if someone is seriously ill, hard to admit that they are dying. Funerals become a celebration of life, which is a very good thing, so

long as we do not hide from the fact of death – which does have to be faced both for our loved ones and for ourselves. Ashes are a potent symbol and are countercultural.

Ashes also signify sorrow for sin. They proclaim moral seriousness. We believe that we shall be judged. There is a right way to live and a wrong way. God cares which we choose. The way we live makes a difference to other people and it determines what happens to us. Putting on ashes on Ash Wednesday indicates that we know that there is a right way to live; we know that we fail to live up to God's standards; and that we are entirely reliant on God's mercies. Again the ashes are a potent countercultural symbol. Our secular society is unsure of its values; most people are too easily satisfied of their own moral worth; and God is a concept we can take or leave without any real consequences.

Our keeping of Lent is sign that we know that we human beings are mortal and that we have eternal significance within the purposes of God. This is something that our world needs to know.

Being bold in the symbols we use, the ways in which we present the faith, may well help us to engage with twenty first century Britain, to grab the attention of secular people and to give them media through which to express their faith as they grow in understanding. Any effective presentation of the Gospel will, however, quiz any culture, passing judgment on those cultural values which are unworthy of people created in the image of God and bear witness to what we could be like if only we would co-operate with God.