

Why Deface the Bible?

Trinity 20 2013

II Kings 5 vv 1-15 p 372, II Timothy 2 vv 8-15 p1196, Luke 17 vv 11-19 p1051

And he said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.

I was appalled to discover this last week that there is a campaign to have Gideon bibles removed from hotel bedrooms. Subscribers are asked to request a bible free room, to write to the head offices of hotel chains demanding that bibles be removed from bedrooms, and, where they do find bibles, to steal them or deface them. What are they afraid of? Surely, if the atheists are right, the bible is just a book. No one is forcing them to read it. So why do they feel a need to stop other people from reading it? Why would militant atheist hate and fear the bible? This very campaign to have the bible removed from hotels gives away the fact that they recognise the bible's power. The bible is powerful. It is the Word of God. You know that and I know that. And because it is powerful the bible poses a threat to atheism.

Have you ever wondered why various government, local government and commercial bodies try to suppress public expressions of Christianity? No Jesus, Mary or Joseph in the Christmas lights. No crosses to be worn at work or school. No offers of prayer to be made by healthcare practitioners for their patients. Why not? The official explanation is usually that Christians might offend people of other faiths by publicly celebrating Christmas or wearing a cross to work or indeed by offering to pray for people. But, generally speaking, people of other religions say they are not offended by Christians practising their faith in public. They just want to be allowed to practise their own faiths and, by and large, Christians are happy to support their right to do so. What seems a bit strange is that the secular authorities pursue a different policy towards other faiths from the one they pursue against Christians. Sikh turbans and Moslem veils and beards are welcomed as an expression of cultural diversity. It is only the cross which people are supposed to find offensive. And that is my point. (There are actually several more points which should be made but there isn't time in one sermon!) My principal point, my only point for today, is that the cross has always been seen as offensive. Right back in New Testament times St Paul writes to the Corinthians, (I Corinthians 1^{23&24}) *But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.* The cross always has been seen as offensive. In Acts 17 the Christians are accused of turning the world upside down. It's a fair cop. Christian faith does turn the world upside down. Militant atheism is quite right to see Christian faith as its foremost adversary. The secular state is right to see Christianity as its greatest threat.

So back to our Gospel story – which follows on nicely from Harvest last week. Ten lepers were cured of their leprosy and only one returned to say *thank you* to Jesus. It was to this leper, the grateful one, that Jesus said, *Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.* They were all cured but only one was made whole. The one who was made whole (*saved* in the original Greek, much more than *made well*, as your pew bibles weakly translate it) was the one who acknowledged Jesus. Jesus had healed Him. Jesus had saved Him. Jesus had also healed the other nine, but they did not acknowledge Him and they were not saved. At least they weren't saved then. As we said last week at Harvest, everything comes from God. Everything we have, everything that we are is the gift of God. So we thank God for who we are. We thank God for one another. We thank God for everything that we have. We thank

God for our talents and our opportunities. When we are thankful to God we acknowledge the reality that we owe everything to Him. We affirm what we say when we pray, *Our Father, which art in heaven*. God is love and love is the giving up of self. On the cross God offers Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. The sins of the world are our failure to offer back to Him everything which we have received from Him, which is everything that we have and everything that we are. We owe everything to God. Our salvation is His gift, His complete and utter giving of Himself. The cross then makes it possible for us to do what we ought always to have done. The cross deals once and for all with our failure to offer ourselves, *our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice*. Jesus on the cross inspires us to deny ourselves, and to take up our cross daily, and to follow him. *For, says Jesus, whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it, For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?* (Luke 9^{24&25}).

So Christian faith does turn the world upside down. It is in absolute opposition to the secular state. Rather, I should say that we are in absolute opposition to the values of the secular state. Christians are revolutionaries, not terrorists. We support government whilst turning its values upside down.

The world, as opposed to the Church, is materialistic. It encourages people to be self-centred. It thinks that this mortal life is all that matters. Human beings are primarily producers and consumers. The purpose of our lives is to transmit our selfish genes to the next generation. The function of government is to maintain order and, increasingly, to provide for our bodily needs. So education is job training. The arts are valued in terms of their revenue-earning potential. Human relationships are provisional and self-centred. Leisure is the way we pass the time when we are doing no productive work, ideally as customers of the leisure industry. Religion is marginalised as one possible leisure interest – one on which the state keeps a wary eye because religion challenges cultural norms and provides an alternative source of authority to the government.

Suppose, however, that people looked to God to meet their needs. Suppose we thought it was more important to be saved than to be healed. Suppose we were truly ashamed to be rich in goods but poor in soul. Suppose we believed that we owed everything to the cross of Christ and that the point of life was not self-centredness but the offering of self. Suppose people believed what Jesus said, *whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it, For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?* What would that say of the world in which we live? We are those people. The bible is our manifesto. We are a threat to the world because we threaten to turn it upside down. We are also the world's salvation because by God's grace we model the values of the Kingdom of God so that in the long run the world may become the Church and with us receive the blessings of eternal life. No wonder we frighten the atheists!