

BRIEFing

An occasional magazine for *Free to Believe*



Radical **Swanwick**

Selected talks from the National Conference

Spring 2019

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The Radical Jesus: Compassionate Resistance and the Issue of Justice

John Churcher is an ordained Methodist Minister with a teaching support ministry especially to those on the edge of Church life or who have fallen off to become members of the Church Alumni; to seekers after a Jesus-based spirituality who may not necessarily want to be associated with any traditional, institutional Church; to those of other faith communities who wish to dialogue as partners in living the values of the Eternal Sacred.

As far as I am concerned, all gods and all scriptures are human creations – the result of the search for understanding through the human struggle with the Rahner’s ‘Infinite Mystery’ or Tillich’s ‘God above God’. Rabbi Jesus is my dark glass glimpse of that Infinite Mystery. He is the one whom I understand and experience; the one who makes sense to me at this time; the one who affirms the way of compassionate non-violent resistance against injustice.



However, a Jewish expectation at the time of Jesus was that “Messiah” would be a military leader to rid the people of foreign occupation and deliver independence once again to the nation. Although Rabbi Jesus chose a named Zealot, Simon, to join his inner circle of disciples I do not think that Jesus of Nazareth was an active Zealot. After all, the Gospel stories demonstrate that Rabbi Jesus welcomed and engaged with those with whom he disagreed.

Even so, Peter's declaration [Mark 8:27-30], "You are the Messiah." was no spiritual revelation, only an opportunistic hope for his own impending greatness as the sword carrier for the one who would defeat the Roman occupation army. Peter expected Jesus to be the one who would replace both Herod and the Roman Empire with Peter the Great standing alongside Jesus the political Messiah, and together they would restore Israel to its promised independent glory. Although Jesus himself probably thought in terms of being a 'Messiah' it was to be the result of a compassionate non-violent defeat of Rome. The radical Rabbi Jesus went on to teach his followers to love their enemies and to do good to those who wished to do them harm. To love one's enemies was not a doormat instruction to his followers but a call to non-violent action against injustice and exploitation.

This really was a radical counter-cultural message in his Galilee as, too, was his advice to his followers to turn the other cheek when slapped by those seen as religious, social or military superiors. This was far from a gentle meek and mild response to violence against the person. It was, in fact, a proactive statement by the oppressed underdog, "I am not your inferior. I am a human being just like you. I am your equal. If you disagree then you will have to slap me again on the other cheek." Rabbi Jesus knew that this was a high risk strategy but non-violent resistance was his radical way.

Tactics of fear

Rome controlled its conquered territory through fear. Women, men and children were regularly crucified, often on the walls of Jerusalem. The radical answer of Rabbi Jesus to such tactics of fear was not to fight violence with violence but to offer the people hope. But Peter and the others just did not get it. Remember that in John's Gospel ch. 18 v10 it was Peter who, in the Garden of Gethsemane, drew the sword in a pointless attempt to stop the arrest of Jesus. Peter had still not understood that the way of Jesus was not about military might but it was about the non-violent challenge to inequality, oppression and injustice.

Peter was so slow to learn that the way of Jesus was not the way of the world. No wonder, back in Mark ch. 8 Jesus continued to accuse Peter of

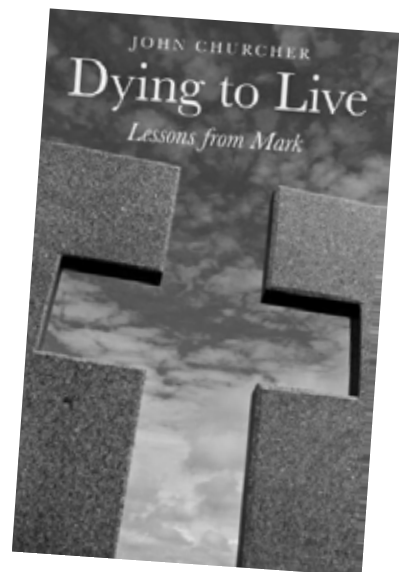
not having in mind the things of God, but instead thinking the things of men - personal importance and greatness at all costs, including violent uprising, when true greatness was to compassionately serve others.

In the Luke 4:18-19 story of the rejection of Jesus at the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth there was a radical counter cultural strategy for social renewal: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [Desmond Tutu reminds us that good news for a hungry person is bread!] He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

A bias to the poor

This radical teaching of Rabbi Jesus contradicted this Pharisaic approach of proclaiming that the rich and influential Jews were obviously blessed by YHWH and the poor, outcast and marginalised were obviously not blessed by YHWH. Jesus taught that the Kin-dom of God was biased toward the needs of the hungry and the thirsty; the homeless and the friendless; the sick and the prisoner. He challenged any exploitation through which the minority achieved and remained rich on the backs of the majority poor. Many mocked Jesus, as this ‘world turned the right way up’ plainly was not the situation that existed in lands occupied by Roman oppressors.

It was a hard lesson in the economy of the Kin-dom proclaimed by the radical Jesus – it is those who are the least who are the greatest. To believe this and to act upon this in the soon to come independent and self-de-



terminated people of YHWH was a spiritual quest requiring far-reaching political and radical economic changes that would put the needs of the poorest people first. This was a rediscovery of YHWH's radical emphasis upon restorative justice in which the outsiders – the marginalised were brought 'in'. It was the practical outworking of the social and economic justice commitment of YHWH to the poor, the migrant, the outsider, the marginalised as stated by the ancient prophets such as Hosea, Micah and Amos.

This compassionate inclusive way of Rabbi Jesus increasingly challenged the exclusive Jerusalem Pharisaic theology of 'holiness by separation' in which the blessed were 'in' and the rest were 'out' and eternally punished. The Jerusalem Pharisaic elite had reduced 'godly' justice to a religious culture of condemnation and punishment.

The vision of Moses

Rabbi Jesus sought to re-establish the egalitarian vision of Moses for the Hebrew people but for that to happen there was a need for those who were the exploiters to recognise the harm that they had done. But more was needed, they should also recompense and seek forgiveness from those who had suffered at their hands. It would not be easy for either party but forgiveness and radical non-judgemental acceptance of difference was the radical way of life for Rabbi Jesus.

This liberating thinking of Rabbi Jesus also emphasised the invitation to follow him, learning from one another and working together for the benefit of all people. Nowhere did he require that one has to give up their birth religion. To follow Jesus was to be part of a true community of unity in diversity. And all this was lived out, not in deep theological discussion but in a profound committed community of those who responded to the invitation of Jesus, "Follow me."

He was concerned with changing the attitudes of his disciples, away from discussions of personal power to them welcoming and accepting the outcast, the vulnerable and the least important into their discipleship community as their equals. The implication was that the disciples needed to look within themselves to rethink their ideas of how one becomes the greatest and the most powerful. It was by being servant of all. In so

doing he attempted to turn the wisdom of this world the right way up – to the community way of the Kin-dom in which YHWH was biased toward the poor, the powerless and the oppressed.

Yet, this was also a subversive and a treasonable political statement for his disciples and for society as a whole, “It is not the high and mighty, the rich and powerful males who come first. Indeed, in the status of the Kin-dom, powerful political and religious men would be the least important.” This amounted to trouble making political insurrection as, by implication, Rabbi Jesus was saying, “Caesar is not god - in fact Caesar is the least important.”

Eventually Rabbi Jesus was executed by Rome, not because he was a wisdom teacher and miracle worker but because he represented a threat to the political and religious order. Pilate’s inscription “King of the Jews” was not mocking the Temple cult and its leadership but was a statement for all to see, “This is what happens to Galilean Zealots who march into Jerusalem with a crowd of followers at Passover time!”

And what has much of the Christian Church done with the radical Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth? In the early fourth century CE it went from the edge of society living by the power of love into the centre of Empire where it exercised the love of power. In doing that it prostituted itself and sadly lost the radical teaching of Jesus. It is time for us to recover the radicalism of Rabbi Jesus. It is a life style that goes beyond what American Christian philosopher Dallas Willard [1935-2013] used to call “Vampire Christians” who only wanted enough of Jesus’s blood to save them from hell, but had no intention of actually really following Jesus by putting his radical words into daily practice.

Out of step with the world

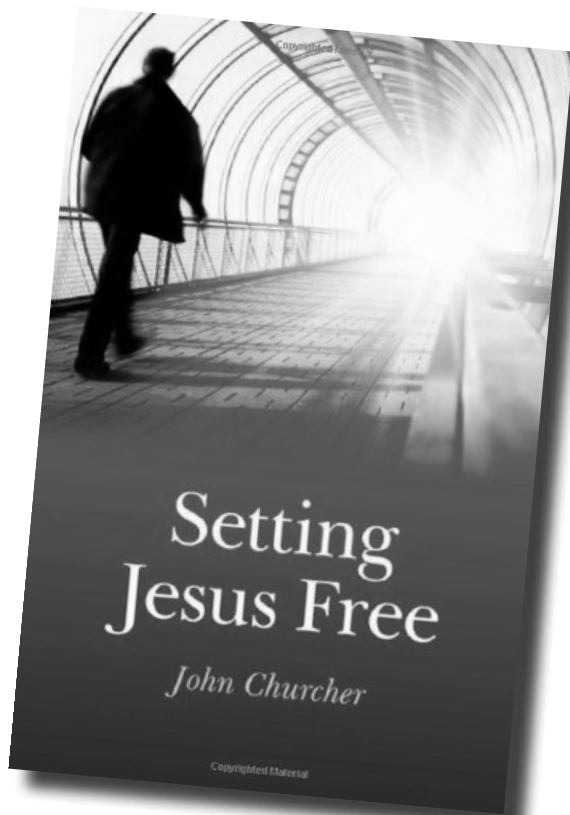
The radicalism of Rabbi Jesus recognised and continues to recognise the signs of the times and the culture of the age but it was unafraid and remains unafraid of being counter-cultural – of being out of step with the thinking and ways of the world when it comes to tackling issues of injustice. It puts a life style of being and doing above and beyond the tribalism of creeds and doctrines and those things that the Church says about Jesus the Christ of the Church.

So, in these perilous times for church membership and especially for those of us associated in one way or another with the URC I suggest that we should not be afraid of denominational death. It might just be the birthing of a truly community based, experiential and undiluted radical Jesus fit for purpose in our post-modern world.

NB: This is a shortened and edited version of a lecture given at the Free to Believe 'Radical Faith' National Conference 2018 [8th to 10th November] at The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick. The lecture was presented as five examples of the radical Rabbi Jesus that I have created to make sense to me:

- 1] The Nature of Galilean Pharisaism,*
- 2] Tribalism and the Conversion of Rabbi Jesus,*
- 3] Compassionate Resistance and the Issue of Justice,*
- 4] Rethinking Greatness, Inclusion, Compassion and Forgiveness,*
- 5] The Injustice and Justice of Divorce.*

The full lecture text can be read on <http://www.permissiontospeak.org.uk>

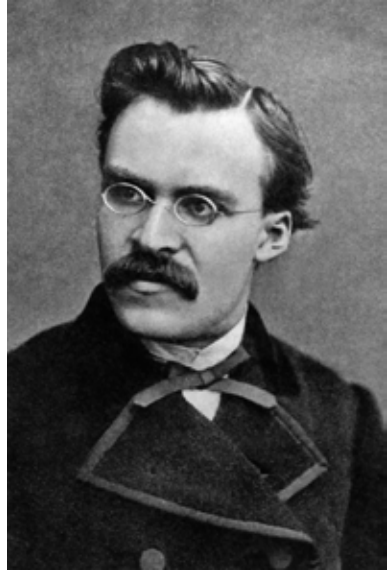


Radical God

Martin Camroux is a URC minister and Chair of Free to Believe

In which recent episode of a popular TV comedy programme did one of the characters quote Nietzsche “God is dead. God remains dead, and we have killed him”?

The answer: Chidi in *The Good Place*, the American fantasy-comedy television series. It’s interesting how culturally pervasive Nietzsche is. Nietzsche has been used to depict teenage angst (“Even if God is dead, you’re still gonna kiss his ass,” Tony tells Anthony Jr. in *The Sopranos*) while his aphorism “That which does not kill us makes us stronger” is the epigraph to *Conan the Barbarian*. Then the popular cartoon *Bojack Horseman* is based on the premise there are no ultimate values in life: all his relationships end in disillusion.



Friedrich Nietzsche:

“Why don’t we love each other anymore” says someone to him? “Same thing that always happens. You didn’t know me. Then you fell in love with me, and now you know me.” Mr. Peanutbutter puts it like this. “The universe is a cruel, uncaring void. The key to being happy isn’t a search for meaning. It’s to just keep yourself busy with unimportant nonsense, and eventually you’ll be dead.” Beyond that Nietzsche is influential on post-modernism. “You have your truth, I have my truth. There is no such thing as the truth.” Then of course there’s the idea of *Übermensch* – Superman. That is where the comic book idea came from, but Adolf Hitler was sure it was actually him and it is still influential among the ultra- right.

God may be dead, but Nietzsche isn’t. Nietzsche was the most significant atheist philosopher of the 19th century and he is still relevant to our

culture today. There are two ideas of his I want to pick out today.

Firstly, God is dead. “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”

For Nietzsche there’s been a fundamental shift in western society. A cultural death. We can no longer believe in God. Would any of us quarrel with this? The Christian core of western civilization has withered. You can see the evidence all around. Each generation is less likely to believe in God than the generation before. So far so uncontroversial. But this is where Nietzsche gets interesting.

No meaning or purpose

Secondly if God is dead, he says, so is the idea that the world has meaning, or our lives a purpose. We need to recognise there is no inherent meaning given to us by life. To a lot of people, it seemed that if there was no God you could just take that out of our systems of belief and everything else would still hold up. Think George Eliot who is so nearly a Christian. Or look at Marx, no God of course but history is heading to the inevitable victory of the proletariat. What’s that but a secularised Christian eschatology? No, says Nietzsche, you just haven’t thought through what’s happened. In *Twilight of the Idols* he writes: “When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one’s feet. This morality is by no means self-evident... Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole.” If you want meaning in life, says Nietzsche, you will have to make it for yourself. “A virtue has to be our invention”.

You may resist this conclusion. but it is inherently logical. Think Martin Luther King. “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”. It sounds wonderful but in what way is it true? Where is this

moral universe? It depends on the view that there is a cosmic reality with a commitment to justice. But without God there is no moral universe. We are in a world that is totally indifferent to us.

Or think of Desmond Tutu.

*Goodness is stronger than evil;
Love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness;
Life is stronger than death;*

It sounds wonderful, but it ends. “Victory is ours through Him who loves us”. Take the last line away what sense could it conceivably make? Says Richard Dawkins “The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.” Says Nietzsche if you want meaning you must make it up for yourself. Nothing sums this up better than Matthew Arnold’s Dover Beach.

*Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

A giant of theology

Now let’s move to Paul Tillich. Tillich was once theologically huge. He made the cover of Time Magazine. Today almost no one reads him. There are reasons for this. Firstly, he was a very bad writer. He never really mastered English. God, Tillich taught, in a famous phrase, is “The Ground of All Being.” Theology students used to have great fun, and demonstrate their erudition, by praying, “Dear Ground of Being.” Secondly, we are in much more conservative times. His commitment



to engaging with culture is out of fashion. Thirdly his wife wrote a biography of him which did huge damage to his reputation. It shows a man who engaged in numerous extra marital affairs and dabbled in pornography. Anyone who has read it will know it is deeply squalid. The question is whether he can still be a source for Christian theology?

In a parallel case I remember how horrified I was to discover Martin Luther King's serial adultery. For me, the question is whether a flawed human being can still be a part of the kingdom and have insights to share? And if not, what hope is there for any of us?

Hell rages among us

Bear with me a while. Let's see if I can show you why he has something to say. Tillich was born in Germany in 1886 and ordained a minister of the Lutheran Church in 1912 and served as a chaplain during the First World War. In 1916 he was at the battle of Verdun, one of the most terrible places in human history. It lasted 10 months and saw something like 700,000 dead. 70, 000 a month. I am reminded of Wilfred Owen

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, -

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

Tillich was involved both in comforting the dying and acting as a gravedigger. Writing to his father he said, "Hell rages among us. It's unimaginable." Unsurprisingly he suffered a nervous breakdown. Returning to the front he broke down a second time and was admitted to hospital and finally sent back to Germany.

The traditional religious faith he had held up to now simply collapsed in the face of carnage. Reflecting on the experience in 1955 he said of the soldiers, “Most of them shared the popular belief in a nice God who would make everything work out for the best. Actually everything worked out for the worst.” Tillich had a Brigadier who was a dogmatic Conservative Christian and believed that prayer could protect a soldier from enemy fire, Tillich challenged him, come on open your eyes.

In his free moments in the French forest he reads Nietzsche. “God is dead” certainly fits what he’s seeing. It seemed to him the God killed off by Nietzsche deserved to die. The God who is all knowing and all powerful, and ordains who the shell is going to hit would be a monster, an egomaniac, Saddam Hussein or Kim Jong Il writ large “This is the God Nietzsche said had to die because nobody can tolerate being turned into a mere object of absolute knowledge and control”.

I’m not sure Tillich ever wholly recovered from that experience. It nearly broke him. He later said he went in the forest a dreaming innocent and went out a wild man. It’s at this point the pattern of casual sex begins. For the rest of his life there was a chaos of despair always threatening him, he was walking on the edge of the abyss. But he found a lifeline. On furlough in 1918 he went to the Kaiser Frederick Museum in Berlin and saw Botticelli’s painting “Madonna with Singing Angels”.

Gazing at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone though the colours of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. As I stood there, bathed in the beauty... Something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken. That moment has affected my whole life, given me the key for interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth.



It’s important that he was responding to that beyond himself. It was a transcendent moment. There was still a depth and a wonder to life. He

talked about it in a variety of ways “Spiritual presence” is one of the most helpful to me. Tillich found, as he kept looking at the paintings, that he was doing theology; he saw that in the dimension of their greatest depth all art and, in fact all life, evokes a religious response.

Yes to life

He found himself he said with a choice. Either to say no to life, and collapse into cynicism, or to say yes to what is experienced as good and positive. I choose, he says, the courage to be, to believe in love in the face of hatred, life in the face of death. Day in the dark of night, good in the face of evil. Despite everything it was a yes to life.



And what about God? The God who is like a superior version of us, only all powerful and all-knowing is dead. That kind of God, the all-powerful male figure who comes down demanding our worship is inherently authoritarian and in practice reinforces elitist and patriarchal power. Such a God is both unbelievable and morally unacceptable. But out of the abyss might there not come a new picture of God? “The courage to be,” Tillich later wrote, “is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety and doubt.” So comes the idea of the God above God.

If the word God has any meaning it does not refer to an object or a being in time or space. It is therefore not helpful to try to prove the existence of God, as one might seek to determine whether there was another planet in the solar system or a place such as Middlesbrough. It is not only that all such attempts fail. It is that this is a category error. We are not seeking to discover that a greater version of ourselves exists, we are looking to the great human experiences of love, wonder, spirit, and beauty and using a metaphor that catches their essence and articulates

their meaning. God is not part of reality. God is ultimate reality. God is not a being, God is the power of being.

Perhaps the most famous Tillich quote of all is from one of his sermons when he says:

For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not. He who knows about depth knows about God.

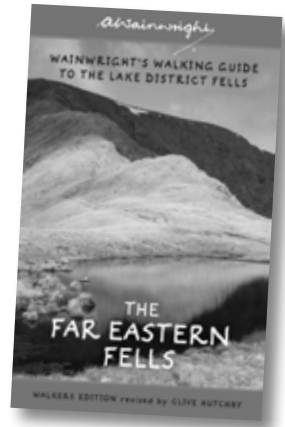
What is the difference between life with depths within it and without it? The first view in fact is widely held. In the bloody mess of the trenches it was hard to see any point, meaning or wonder to life. Or today what of the view held by some scientists that there is no such thing as the spiritual, only the material? Francis Crick puts it like this, , “Looked at in this light our mind is simply a puppet on a string and so are we. You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve-cells and their associated molecules.” The alternative is to see that life has depths, that spiritual presence is a reality both in ourselves and in life itself. That we are, as the Psalmist says, “Fearfully and wonderfully made”.

On Orrest Head

Let me take an example. Just outside Windermere is Orrest Head. It's a favourite climb for visitors. At the top there's a plaque to Alfred Wainwright, who wrote many books of Lakeland walks. In 1930, at the age of 23, he saved up enough money to take a holiday in the Lake District, away from his native town of Blackburn. On arrival in Windermere, he immediately climbed Orrest Head.

Quite suddenly, we emerged from the shadows of the trees and were on a bare headland and, as though a curtain had dramatically been torn aside, beheld a truly magnificent view. It was a moment of magic, a revelation so unexpected that I stood transfixed, unable

to believe my eyes. I saw mountain ranges, one after another, the nearer starkly etched, those beyond fading into the blue distance. Rich woodlands, emerald pastures and the shimmering water of the lake below added to a pageant of loveliness, a glorious panorama that held me enthralled. I had seen landscapes of rural beauty pictured in the local art gallery, but here was no painted canvas; this was real. This was truth. God was in his heaven that day and I a humble worshipper...'



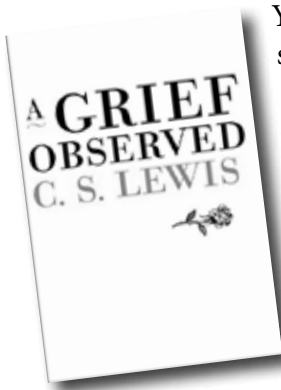
He ends...*'Those few hours on Orrest Head cast a spell and changed my life.*

What is going on here? A life decision. According to reductionist science this is simply a physical process. But was it the physical qualities of mountain and lake which changed his life, any more than it was the quality of the paint that changed Tillich? Clearly something non-material, the beauty of lake and hill play their part. There is another factor too. Our reaction to the Lake District is seen through the lens of a post-Wordsworth world influenced by the ideas and dreams of the Romantic Movement. The power of poetry and art is a causative factor in the experience. Life has depth. The reality of our human life is of an inner reality and depth. This needs to be recovered and the way to do it is to supplement scientific reasoning by stories, images and symbols which conjure up the human. These are the very essence of the task of theology. The humanist project depends upon the religious vision.

Let me finish with two propositions. Firstly, God as supernatural Being has died and deserves to die. I don't believe in that God and I suspect quite a few of you don't either. As Peter Gomes puts it, "Religion for many moderns, has been reduced to a belief in the unbelievable". There are those who would go further, like Don Cupitt or Gretta Vosper, and say that all ideas of God go with it. I am with Tillich. I believe in the God above God, the spiritual reality which is at the heart of love and life. God is a valid symbol for the transcendent, the beyond in the midst of life.

I grew up in Norfolk. I often went for walks. When I go back now, for me as for John Betjeman “These Norfolk lanes recall lost innocence”. But Norfolk is, as Noel Coward pointed out, rather flat. One of the wonders of my childhood was the holidays we had in the Western Isles of Scotland. When I looked out from Pulpit hill at Oban to the Hebrides, across the Firth of Lorne to the Isle of Mull I realized that life had a wonder to it that Norfolk had not prepared me for. Later that wonder came in other ways, listening to Elgar’s Dream of Gerontius in Winchester Cathedral, in poetry, art, in worship and prayer, in architecture and the experience of loving relationships. As Archibald MacLeish sang it:

*Now at 60 what I see
Although the world is worse by far
Stops my heart in ecstasy,
God, the wonders that there are.*



Yes of course a picture of God has died, God as supernatural being. It was never very good theology in the first place. But all theologies are only partially true at best, all concepts of God are inadequate words. The pictures we have of God are images that often need smashing. C. S. Lewis had been hugely popular as a Christian apologist offering a confident version of the gospel. Then his wife died tragically of cancer. For the first time he was plagued by terrible questions and he came to feel there was something inadequate in all the theology he had ever written up to that point. He wrote that he had come to see that “My idea of God has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself... Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of his presence?”

Theologies crumble, sermons look even more ridiculous than when we first preached them. Thirty-volume systematic theologies turn out to say nothing at all, but the wonder of life remains. As W H Auden says, “Space is the whom our loves are needed by, ours is the choice of how to love and why”. For all his disturbed life and troubled mental state Paul Tillich knew it. In one of his sermons he said this:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life...It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!" If that happens to us, we experience grace.

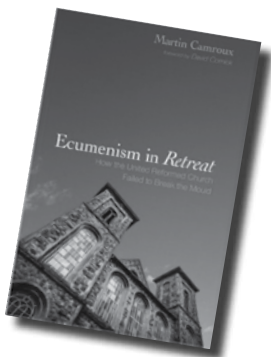
On the original manuscript of this sermon Tillich had hand-written "For myself! 20th August 1946"

Martin Camroux's groundbreaking book is still available:

Ecumenism in Retreat:

How the United Reformed Church
Failed to break the Mould.

Available from 4 Sorrel Close Colchester CO4 5UL
£17 including postage.



FREE TO BELIEVE READING PARTY

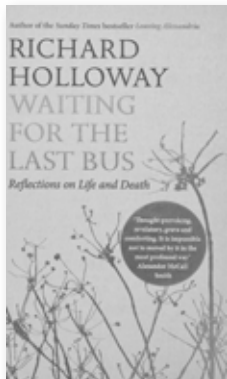
This year the Free to Believe reading party is at Bishop Woodford House at Ely, from Monday September 9th–Thursday 12th.

We will be looking at Richard Holloway's lively and provoking *Waiting for the Last Bus: Reflections on Life and Death* together with some parallel reflections from Dale Allison's *Night Comes: Death, Imagination and the last things*.

The conference will be led by Anne Lewitt and Martin Camroux.

Reading parties are much smaller and intimate than conferences, with more time for discussion and more free time to explore the area, which in this case is a delight. Bookings have been coming in very fast and there is a waiting list for en-suite rooms but there may be cancellations.

Non en-suite rooms are £235 (£255 en-suite) and a £50 deposit is required. Contact Martin Camroux at 4 Sorrel Close Colchester CO4 5UL or mf.camroux@gmail.com



The Bible can be Bad

Trevor Dennis is a retired Chancellor and Vice Dean of Chester Cathedral, formerly Tutor in Old Testament Studies at Salisbury and Wells Theological College and the author of numerous books

From a sermon I preached in Chester Cathedral on July 13th, 2003 – the date, as you will see, is significant:

‘They call this, ‘The Good Book.’ (I held up a Bible.) ‘And so it is. Its storytelling and poetry are often stunning in their beauty, their sharpness and their depth. It has humour, pathos, irony, plain-speaking. It is occasionally hilarious, at other times unspeakably sad, invariably challenging. It has brought countless millions face to face with God. I have taught it for many years, and I am still enthralled by it. It makes God real for me, brings her down to earth, paints her in such bright colours, takes me deeper and deeper into the strange territory of her love.

‘Back in 379 (379!) it helped inspire a great teacher of the Church, Gregory of Nyssa, to condemn slavery. In the 1970’s and 80’s in the States Christian and Jewish congregations quoted it as they sought to help refugees fleeing from El Salvador and Guatemala, and defied their own federal government when it tried to deport them.’ (Is nothing new?)

‘Yet for some this has been the worst book on earth. For 1400 years it was used to claim that all black Africans were cursed by God, and to justify their capture and enslavement. Men have appealed to its pages when accusing women of witchcraft and executing them. Preachers have quoted it in presenting God as a grotesque tyrant, rubbing his hands with glee as he consigns yet more souls to hell. Still it is used to keep women in their place, to deny them their proper dignity, their worth, their status and their power.

‘And now it is being flung in the faces of gays and lesbians, and has been used to prevent a very good man from being consecrated as Bishop of Reading.’ (Jeffrey John)

When I say the Bible can be bad, I don’t mean that kind of thing. In that sermon I was speaking of the use and abuse of the Bible. That is a very

large subject in itself, but it is not my topic for this session with you. Rather I wish to focus on the text itself, the text as it stands, not as it has been used or abused over the centuries.

It might seem perverse to begin with John 3.16. You might think I should have started with the Jericho story in Joshua 6 and its divinely engineered massacre. The tale spells it out: ‘. . . man and women, young and old, ox and sheep and ass.’ God is angry with his people after that, but not because of their violence, but because a certain Achan of the tribe of Judah has stolen some treasure from the city and buried it beneath his tent. Once he is discovered and he and his family and animals are stoned to death and burned, then God is happy and can enable his people to do to the inhabitants of Ai what they have just done to those in Jericho.

The wine of God’s wrath

You might have expected me to turn to Revelation, and to any number of passages in that most violent book. To this for example: ‘Then another angel... cried with a loud voice, “Those who worship the beast and its image... they will also drink the wine of God’s wrath... and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever.’ (Rev. 14.9-10) Every time I hear that passage I think of the crematoria of Auschwitz... and what uniforms are the angels and Christ the Lamb wearing?



David Frankfurter, in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, in his Introduction to Revelation on p. 464, calls it out, and demonstrates how easy it is for us to turn our faces away from such a text: ‘It has long been customary among Christian exegetes to attribute the vindictiveness of this imagery, and the violence of the text overall, to some putative persecution that the author and his intended audience were suffering: Domi-

tian's policies, local pogroms, a particular efflorescence of the emperor cult, or Roman imperial rule in general. This tendency in historical interpretation manages to turn violently vindictive fantasy into righteous political critique.'

'Violently vindictive fantasy.' YES! That is what it is, and we need to say so, and we need to teach so and preach so. We need to be honest.

Yet precisely because Joshua 6 or Revelation 14 leaps to mind, I'm going to ignore them. (Of course, I haven't, but hey.) The badness of the Bible can be more subtle, better camouflaged, and for that reason more dangerous.

But John 3.16?! 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...' Change the gender, and will it still work?

Sometimes when you do that, the passage falls at once into a heap. Try substituting Sarah for Abraham in the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, and you will see what I mean.

'For God so loved the world that she gave her only Son...' Some years ago a woman from Liverpool appeared on the television news after her young child had been dreadfully injured. I forget the details, but I can still see her looking straight into the camera and saying, 'You wish it was you, don't you.' She meant it.

Part of the trouble with John 3.16 is that Jesus has just said to Nicodemus, '... just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.' What does John mean by 'lifted up'? In the first instance, crucifixion. He won't be lifted up very high, because as John no doubt knew, the Romans crucified people naked, with their genitals at eye level. 'So must the Son of Man be lifted up...' And then, 'For God so loved the world that she gave her only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' Doesn't work. Not by my book. 'You wish it were you, don't you.'

The truth is, I believe, God came herself. Kneeling beside the manger in Bethlehem, we find ourselves looking level-eyed into the face of God. At Golgotha, also, we look into God's eyes. But that is just too appalling, too

nonsensical, too humbling, so we pretend at this point that God the Father (not God the Mother, please note) is safe in heaven. The truth was and is more brutal... and more wonderful.

Shame on us!

Moving on... to the subject of women in the Bible? Well yes, I could well have done. After all, in my experience and in my reading the feminist scholars have been the ones who have shown the greatest courage and candour in calling out the 'bad' bits in the Bible. Throughout both Testaments women play the bit parts, and not enough of them. There are glorious exceptions, the book of Ruth, for example, or Lamentations, where we hear the anguished cries of women caught up in war, or The Song of Songs, where the voice of the man in love is balanced by that of the woman, and where she has the first and final words. Yet women are far too often ignored, silenced, or abused in its pages.

I recall a woman student at Salisbury and Wells Theological College asking to see me when I was teaching Old Testament studies there in the 80s. We were studying Hosea, and as it happens it was being read at our Morning Prayer as well. Speaking of Hosea's treatment of Israel as Yahweh's faithless wife, she said, 'I can't take this stuff anymore.' I can remember precisely where she was sitting when she said that. 'I can't take this stuff anymore.' Too often we can. Or else we simply ignore it, and pretend it's not there. Shame on us! The patriarchy and the occasional misogyny of the Bible need to be openly acknowledged, to be taught and preached in plain, unflinching terms. Otherwise we may simply replicate them in our own beliefs and practices. But I guess I don't need to tell you that.

The incipient antisemitism of parts of the New Testament is more subtle,



more insidious. (And, of course, antisemitism has been much in the news for months now.)

On August 12th this year, for those of us using Common Worship, John 6.41-51 was the Gospel for the day. I was in my local parish church and the preacher was a retired priest and university lecturer, who is wonderful and full of wisdom. But he didn't comment on the Gospel's opening, 'Then the Jews began to complain about him', and when afterwards I thanked him for a fine sermon (which it was), and pointed out that John has Jesus say 'your ancestors', not 'our ancestors', he hadn't noticed.

No wonder I grew up thinking Jesus was a Christian!

And still we forget he was a devout worshipping Jew, who wore the tassels to prove it.

We all know it gets worse than John 6 in the New Testament. I've quoted on your sheet those notorious verses from John 8 and Matthew 27. We need to listen to Jewish voices on this subject, which is why I have also quoted Jonathan Sacks, and Amy-Jill Levine, a Reformed Jew, and a professor of New Testament and Jewish studies in the Bible belt of the States.

There is an ancient narrative, popular in the Church since the time of Paul, of a God who has his favourites, a God who chooses one and rejects another: Abel is accepted, Cain rejected; Isaac is chosen, Ishmael is banished with Hagar his mother to the desert, where they come to the very brink of death. Then there is Jacob and Esau, ancestors of Israel and Edom, and only one of them can be the ancestor of the people of God. It becomes the dominant narrative of the Bible.

In my book *The Gospel Beyond the Gospels*, however, I explain there is a powerful counter-narrative to all this, beginning in Genesis 1 and its remarkable claim that all human beings are



made in the image and likeness of God, moving through Deuteronomy with its 'You shall not abhor any of the Edomites, for they are your kin' (Deut. 23.7), through Amos, Isaiah and Jonah. (Jonah ends, you will recall, with that astonishing question put in the mouth of God, 'Should I have no compassion on Nineveh?' - A modern equivalent, in a Jewish story set in the period of Nazi power, would be, 'Should I have no compassion on Berlin?')

The two sons

And in *The Gospel Beyond the Gospels* I also spend nearly 40 pages on what I call the Parable of the Two Brothers (often called the Prodigal Son - but there are two sons, not one). I pay as much attention to the second half as to the first, to the father's relationship with his elder son, as much as to that with his younger one. I argue, and I am not alone, that the punchline of the story is found in the words of the father to the elder son, 'Dear child, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.' 'Dear child' means the father loves his sons equally. 'You are always with me' - the elder son is not the outsider he thought he was. 'All that is mine is yours' - he is still the heir after all. And yet there is his younger brother, centre stage in the feast called by his father, dressed in the best robe, with his father's ring on his finger! (A veritable peal of bells start ringing here, reminding us of Jacob wearing Esau's robe to trick his father into giving him his brother's birth right, or of Joseph and his 'richly embroidered tunic', the clear sign that he was his father's favourite, or of the Pharaoh in Egypt appointing him his second-in-command, and putting the ring on his finger to prove it.)

In this mischievous parable Jesus appears almost until the end to be following the ancient narrative of a father whose younger son is his favourite. Yet with the punchline we end up with a gloriously impossible tale of a father with two elder sons! In the end Jesus chooses the counter-narrative, and beneath those few marvellous words of the father to his elder son, just 12 in the Greek, tells a tale of a God who embraces all, including those who reject him and hurl their anger in his face.

The Parable of the Two Brothers is only in Luke. So is the dialogue between Jesus and the two criminals crucified beside him.

‘One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds [Really? This is crucifixion we are talking about! Are these the words of a crucified man? I think not. Luke’s imagination has failed him here], but this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”’

It’s so easy, isn’t it, to slip back into the dominant narrative! The implication is clear. The other criminal will be left to die in the pitch dark, and will remain there for eternity. Luke presents us with a dying Jesus who accepts one and rejects another. And why is that first criminal rejected? For uttering words which are far less forceful, far less accusatory than those spoken by the elder son to the father in the parable; for saying things to Jesus which do not begin to compare with the fierce onslaughts that God endures from Moses, Jeremiah, or Job, to name but three.

The second criminal reminds us of Job’s companions who are so offended by the accusations he hurls at God, but in the end of that great work they are the ones condemned by God: ‘My wrath is kindled against you,’ God says to Eliphaz, ‘and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.’ (Job 42.7) God knows Job has spoken from the heart, from a heart that is broken in half – like the criminal who cries in his great agony, ‘Save yourself and us!’ The book of Job, indeed the Old Testament as a whole, is on the side of the first criminal, not the second.

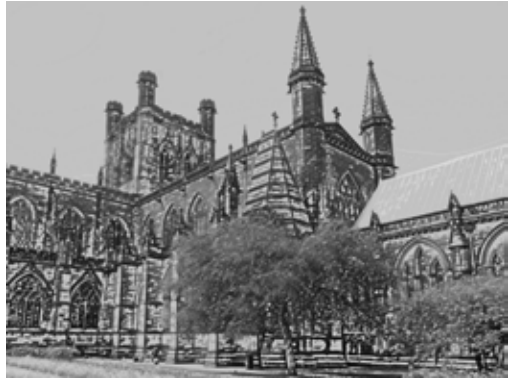
More importantly, Luke here effectively reinstates a God who chooses one and rejects another.

We have to call that out. It makes God less resilient, less accepting, less insightful, less forgiving than many human beings, with an embrace which does not stretch as far as theirs. And that is bad theology. God cannot be less good than the very best of human beings. We cannot bring him down to our level, let alone below it. If we know anything of

God, it is of an overwhelming Love that is large enough to embrace the whole universe, or however many universes there might be, and which is utterly unshakable.

Justice without forgiveness

On September 14, 2008 I was preaching on the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave in Chester Cathedral, at our main Sunday Eucharist. I said this: ‘The world of the parable is one entirely without forgiveness. The king’s ‘forgiving’ the slave’s vast debt is not forgiveness at all, but an assertion of his fearful power. His fellow slaves who



report him when he nearly throttles one of their number and throws the poor man into prison because of a small unpaid debt, they seek a justice which allows no room for forgiveness. And finally the king takes back his earlier ‘forgiveness’ – as if true forgiveness can ever be taken back – and hands the slave over to be tortured, tortured till the entire debt is paid. And when will that be? Never. The debt is enormous. He will die first. So the king of the story effectively condemns the man to be tortured slowly, relentlessly, to death.’

Then I quoted the parable’s final words: ‘So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’ At that point I exploded: ‘No he won’t! That is blasphemy, Matthew! How dare you put such words into Jesus’ mouth, into the mouth of the very one who has just been talking of forgiveness without limit, without end’ (I was referring to the saying about forgiving seventy seven times, which immediately precedes the parable). ‘How dare you compare God to a ruthless, self-seeking, abusive tyrant! Are you being ironic? Then you take irony too far! For God does know how to forgive. Of that we can be quite sure. Forgiveness, true forgiveness is her beginning, her middle and her end.’ You can imagine me thumping the pulpit, can’t you! (Except we

didn't have a pulpit, only a lectern. It had to be repaired afterwards – no, that's not true.)

How could such a parable be told? There may well be a true parable of Jesus lurking somewhere in its lines, but if so it is deep buried in the story Matthew gives us. How can such an image of God, the image of God as a torturer, be conjured up from the depths of our human fear?

Because Matthew has turned for his inspiration to the world of men of absolute power, and that is a most dangerous place for theology to play in.

King, warrior or judge?

For millennia God or the gods have been portrayed as kings, warriors, judges – so that kings in their turn can present themselves as gods or the sons of gods and claim absolute authority. The court of kings is the main source of metaphors used of God in the Bible, in both Testaments. And at a time in the West and in this country, when the Church has lost much of its authority, our hymns, songs and prayers are bursting with praise for God our king, and not so long ago we even invented a new festival, Christ the King, to express our hankering for the old days of the Church's empire, and assert our longing for a greater authority of our own. The churches where they sing such songs with the greatest relish are often those who seek to exercise the greatest authority over their own members, and to declare to all and sundry that they are the true keepers of the faith, the only guardians of the Truth.

Over the centuries those metaphors of God as king, warrior, or judge have done enormous harm, especially in those times when the Church has indeed wielded great political and even military power.

Yet are they not most strange for us Christians to use at all, when we have a crucified Son of God at our centre, and tell tales about him where he never, in any of the Gospels, behaves like a king, but instead acts as a slave and goes so far as to wash his friends' feet.

For God's sake, thanks to John, we have a God who is a footwasher!

You see? *The Bible can be bloody good too!*

A Radical Triumph



After initial conference planning disasters 'never before experienced in the history of the human race' (Camroux), the revamped 2018 Free to Believe National Conference on 'Radical Faith' came up trumps with enthralling speakers and a resulting general agreement that this was one of the best ever.

Topics included

Radical God (Martin Camroux)

Radical Jesus (John Churcher)

Radical Communities (Kate Gray)

The Bible can be Bad/Sad/Funny (Trevor Dennis).

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A credo for today?

Former URC Moderator Alasdair Pratt proffered this reflection on the conference, which I thought a worthy discussion-starter. [Ed.].

I am much more intuitive than theological. I measure effectiveness by style and substance. On this occasion I totally concur with what is obviously a widely held view when I say I enjoyed and valued this conference as well as any other I have attended. I felt personal needs in my own pilgrimage were addressed.

So what is it that makes a theological conference 'come alive'? But, then, what is it that ever made/makes the Gospel, the kerygma, 'come alive'? Surely it is when the reality within the message speaks to people at a level that touches them where they are; which articulates what intuitively they know they are seeking but have not yet found the words that express and address the needs they feel.

This goes beyond leaders/lecturers 'stating the obvious' rather well. If Jesus was effective (am I allowed to use his name here?!) it was because people in his day asked why traditional teachers could not also speak truths with such clarity. And while I don't expect all our lecturers – or, indeed, preachers – to bear his charisma, effective communication begins from the ability of the speaker to know where the hearers 'are at'. Obviously if the lecturer comes from a different culture 'getting on the wavelength' of strangers may not be easy. We have had some good academic speakers over the years, but academics can have very dry styles of presentation, and I am not persuaded that they are always aware of how important it is to make contact in communicating ideas and concepts.

When attending church I respond to preaching that shows a desire to bring the source and heart of the message alive. At conferences in particular I always go with the hope that what I hear will 'scratch where I itch'. We were so lucky this year because all the speakers came across with passion, enthusiasm, energy and conviction.

John Churcher began by scratching all my itches ! because he articulated so well what I needed to hear. But then he lost his way. It became clear he had not organised his material for our context, his timing was awry and he openly admitted he was jumping around, which towards the end made following his train of thought, for me at least, difficult.

If I want passion and `making connection` Martin`s talk was brilliant. Yes, it strayed all over the place but it was profound. It came not only from the head but from the heart, and how that heart must have been hurting that day. Somehow the depth of feelings with which he spoke was fuelled by the emotions within him. But it makes the point how important it is when the speaker `knows` the audience.

So, I am clearly talking about the effectiveness of the programme rather than a critique of the themes.

It makes me ask: “What is a conference like this for?” But I think I offered some answers in the third para above.

What pointers, if any, are there for future conferences? First I think it is undeniable that we have to understand why the supporting age-group is what it is. To whom are we speaking and why is it that this is the clientele that are coming? And for how long will there be those who come?

The style and content of this one appealed. The original proposal led by Diana Butler Bass obviously didn`t. I would probably have come for the company, not the topic, had the original plans happened. Is it too unimaginative and naïve to wonder whether there is opportunity to explore what would make up the contents of a `credo` today?



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