

Ivory Towers Muddy Ground - 27 - 29 March 2009-01-21

Ten minute introductory paper for group discussion

Title: Reclaiming the 'voice of God' through word, presence and action.

The title of this conference is Ivory Towers and Muddy Ground. It is posing a dichotomy which, in part, I wish to address directly. This is why I have given this brief paper a title that begins 'reclaiming.' The conference title stresses for me a serious dilemma, which is that theology is generated, substantially, in the academy, and it is required to be applied in the churches. It may be that those that generate the theology and teach it to students preparing for ministry have experience of muddy ground. For some this is substantial, for others less so. However the system that generates and teaches theology has its own constraints and professional parameters, and they are not those of the muddy ground.

A second factor that we need to take into account is the nature of the muddy ground. We may want to make Christendom assumptions, even modified Christendom assumptions, pointing to state occasions which are shaped by Christian liturgy. We may draw upon the heritage of the past in relation to the law, the caring professions, and the privilege extended to the churches. In trying to take the voice of God seriously I want to argue that there is a dynamic of our society that needs to be taken into consideration. We are a minority group. We need to stop assuming and behaving as if we are a substantial majority. I hope I do not offend anyone by saying that we are not Manchester United, or even Birmingham City. We are more like Dulwich Hamlet. There is much left over from pseudo-Christendom times, some of which is suspect in terms of the voice of God being heard. However if we take the population of this country who are not of another religion, less than ten percent are engaged with the Church. The word 'engaged' is significant. That is not taking into account those that attend the 'greetings-card events' of Christmas and Easter, Mothering Sunday, of baptisms, funerals, and marriages. Let us not delude ourselves into thinking that such attendances are significant to the ongoing life of the Church, or that such attendances mean that people are entering into the sacramental community life of the Church. Add up the hours! Work out the values! Compare this with so many of the other attractions of society. There is an anthropological and

residual attraction felt towards some of the things the Church has on offer, but it is not engagement with God and His Church. They may hear a little of the voice of God, but the off button is mostly active.

The phenomena of a generalised spirituality is also to be taken into account. Some have said that we live in a more spiritual time than we have for over a century. It may be so, but spirituality is not the same as engaging with the church. In my experience those that claim a spirituality that is important to them are wanting to avoid anything that claims a truth to be found that is in any way definitive. The centrality of the Lord Jesus is often seen as striving for an authority that should be vested in the individual. It is part of our society's ideology that it does not matter what you believe, and if you say it does, then you are being bigoted.

My proposal is that as the Church we are committed to being God's people and to mediating him in the society in which he has placed us. The 'voice of God' is identified through words, presence, and action. The world we live in is ideological, with the ideologies not always expressed, and often conflictual. The 'voice of God' is heard, or ignored, in many ways in our society through his Church. The Church should engage with society with eyes open, and ears sensitive to what we are saying and what others are saying.

These three should be taken seriously in terms of the overall mission of the Church, and in relation to the theological education we are providing to sustain that mission. They cannot stand alone. The voice expressed in words is an important part of God's communication to us and to the world. In the Scriptures he is anthropomorphised into delivering words that guide individuals and whole nations. The voice of God is also heard through the presence of His people. In my understanding this is about testimony to His grace and purposes through what we are as God's people. The quality of life, and the works of love and care speak out of those things found in the Lord Jesus. In our Christian faith we are not just enlisting under a name, we are seeking to be changed into his likeness. It is what we are that qualitatively defines the Good News we are expressing silently. The actions of God's people are also part of the voice of God. It is the demonstration of the effective power of the propositions and the outcome of engagement. The church needs to take seriously the three acting together, and both feeding on and drawing on, each other. If it is words only the message can fall into dogma. If it is being only then the voice is incomplete, silent and without the lives that validate the other voices. If it is actions only then the witness to a salvific God is left without validating qualities and explanations.

The stories we have of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus affirms this. We have to set aside the creedal gap 'born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate.' It has been ingrained in many of us as our creed, when it is a document produced to try to resolve conflict. We are in danger of missing out on the model and example, even the resource, of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. He set out the three factors together, and the voice of God was heard.

It would seem, from speaking to Anglicans, Baptists, and Roman Catholics both in preparation for ministry and in the practice of ministry that some see themselves as specialists in one area, not recognising the inter-dependence necessary. As receivers of theological education they also state that the emphasis is on 'word' with presence and action being seen as either optional or secondary. They feel more confident with the propositional truth, but not so assured in living it out and the servant-hood of truth. The neonate clergy are expected to take the voice into the muddy ground. A woman in her late forties stood in front of a statement of belief on the notice board of a Baptist Church in Camberwell, South London. She had been brought to the church by a friend. 'How many of these do I have to believe to be a real Christian?' she asked. I pointed to the one that spoke of Jesus as friend and Saviour as a starting point.

I want to argue that we are in danger of developing a lack of confidence in the Good News that we have in Christ, and that can mute, or even silence the voice of God. People in general reject the institutions of society. Voting is low at elections and political involvement is lower. The NHS is criticised except in emergencies. They are cynical about the educational system. They are ambivalent about the police. They adopt a consumerist approach to the Christian Church. Not only Tesco's this Christmas, but the Baptist Church too – 'they are so good with children.' Not only Waitrose this Easter, but that Anglican Church too – 'it is so good with its ritual.' In this substantial rejection of the Church we can find that the voice of God is not heard, however it is presented. Do you know the old musical hall song 'you can tell a man who boozes by the company he chooses . . . and the pig got up and slowly walked away'? I put to you that as ministers and clergy we are identified with the irrelevant for most of the population.

Rev'd Roy Dorey