

## 20150322Lent5Sermon Do you need God to be good

Brian Mountford, in his book, *Perfect Freedom: How Liberal Christianity might be the answer to your faith* asks as a chapter heading, 'Do you need God to be good...' What I think is the author is saying is that 'good' qualifies 'you'. In order for **you** to be good – do you need God? I suppose down to its basic level, what he is asking is 'Do you need to have a belief in God in order to live a morally upright life?'

This is also an interesting question. If we say 'yes', it makes us want wonder about all the **good** people we know, who do not go to church and do not believe in God, yet are still good. On the other hand and judging by some of the Collects from our Anglican Prayer Book it would appear that we definitely **do** need God to be good. For example, from the old BCP the Collect for the First Sunday after Trinity says to God, '*because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do **no good thing without you**, grant us the help of your grace*', and the Collect for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity begins, '*O God, forasmuch as **without you we are not able to please you***'. So, says Brian Mountford, this suggests that all goodness comes from God and, that acts of goodness, whether we know it or not, come and are derived from God. I think that last phrase is the important one '**whether we know it or not**'. Many believe in what is called a 'natural theology' where without our awareness or consciousness, God, in whom we may or may not believe ensures right behaviour from us.

However, presuming that those examples from the Collects are true, then as a Liberal Christian I still have no problem simply because we understand life as 'being in a relationship to the God who created us.' But back to my earlier question - what about our unbelieving friends? They do not accept the existence of God, so the statement that we 'cannot do anything good without God' is obviously ludicrous, and even offensive to them. They would point out that there are many honest, neighbourly people who have no religious faith at all, and they would add that if we look at Christian history we would find that it isn't exactly filled with lives that are obviously better than others. So religion should not be seen as the only source of morality.

Nevertheless Christianity has a very distinctive moral quality about it. Christian ethics ask us to think how Christ would have behaved in this or that situation and what would he have had to say to us today. There are memorable teachings from Jesus such as, *blessed are the peace makers*, and the requirement to go the extra mile, but he also saw the good in everyone, however socially resented or despised they were. His words and actions seem perfectly matched,

**So, what is the essence of Jesus' moral teaching?** Best answer is in the Sermon on the Mount where, in a series of illustrations, he elaborates what he means when he says that he came to fulfil the Jewish law. He suggests that one needs to look behind practical rules in order to discover their moral essence. For example, behind murder lies the motive of anger and insulting disregard for others; behind adultery lies a self-indulgent lust that treats others as objects. Obviously in the eyes of the law anger and lust are not crimes and are not punishable as such, nor is Christ suggesting that they should be. He recognised that anger and lust are natural emotions that each of us experiences from time to time, and that even though our moral character might be of the same essence as murder and adultery, **self-control** is an over-riding virtue.

This is also illustrated by Jesus' loathing of hypocrisy and false piety, objecting to those who make a show of praying on the street corner, or publicly giving alms, or disfiguring their faces to show that they are fasting. It is important to practice what you preach and not to be flash but rather be humble. On the practical side we see Jesus' morality exemplified in his social conscience as he preaches good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.

If you boil down Jesus' moral agenda you find that he is greatly concerned with the harmful effect that wealth and violence can have on morality, that he has little to say about sex and power (despite the Christian obsession with these things), and that he is massively in favour of forgiveness, reconciliation ; and the love of neighbour. In fact what we get from Jesus' teachings and life-style is a theory of ethics rather than an applied system or moral rulebook. He doesn't provide easy answers to moral dilemmas, but instead gives an overarching principle for making moral decisions, a basic moral standard - namely, to establish what would be the most selflessly loving action in any particular situation.

Jesus was also a dreamer with a utopian vision of purity and perfection. Do you remember Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount, by saying 'be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'. Wow! Surely this is **reckless idealism**?

Well not really, the Sermon on the Mount speaks of loving ones enemies and turning the other cheek. These famous sayings are metaphors for this reckless idealism, not necessarily to be taken literally. 'Reckless idealism' means for Jesus that you must take the risk of love, which is also a risk that you might get hurt. That, I think, is what is meant by turning the other cheek - making oneself vulnerable in the quest for goodness.

**But how do we apply this Idealism in practice?** That is the continuous debate. I have a Dictionary of Christian Ethics that runs to 700 pages and covers issues ranging from government to war, sexuality to divorce, genetic engineering to euthanasia, and poverty to wealth. On all of these questions there are Christians who hold different or opposite views, even though they have started from the same basic texts and principles. The problem is that what a person believes is right depends on how they interpret Scripture, how important tradition is to them and indeed which part of the world they come from, since local customs and traditions have great influence.

There are Christians who oppose abortion in all cases and those who do not; Christians who are pacifists and those who are not; Christians who believe in the cancellation of Third World debt and those who do not. Basically hardly ever is there a clear cut, generally agreed, Christian teaching on a particular moral question, which can be particularly frustrating to those who want Church leaders to 'speak out' on issues.

All this makes us ask, in Liberal Christianity is there **Moral certainty or relativism?** The fact that Christians sometimes disagree over moral issues can lead to insecurity and loss of confidence amongst them. You might expect God as the ultimate moral authority to provide us with unequivocal moral laws such as the Ten Commandments. There ought, you might think, to be little room for debate for those who receive their guidance from God. Yet, in practice even the Church itself, consulting the sacred texts and seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit through prayer, finds it difficult to be definitive on issues such as whether divorced persons should remarry in church, whether practising homosexuals should be ordained, or whether bombing suspected terrorist bases is consistent with the theory of a Just war. The reality is that Christians have to make moral judgements based on God given principles and act according to conscience, and in personal relationship with God. And this is broadly the position liberal Christians take. To be more specific they would say that there is one overarching God-given principle, self-giving love, and that this is the model for all moral action. But the fact that the application of the principle sometimes results in different outcomes can lead to the criticism that it is a liberal approach in which 'anything goes' - a form of relativism or compromise. But self-giving love isn't relative; it doesn't vary from one society to another; it seems to be a universal principle that human beings can understand instinctively.

So, Christianity then, **is** an ethical religion. Believing in God has implications for how a person ought to behave. The quality both of an individual's and the Church's faith is judged by how they act. Christian action should be the natural by-product of Christian faith and Christianity's greatest advertisement. So, what areas in our lives are we called to action?

I'm sure you are perhaps thinking of with the old formula of 'Wealth, Sex and Power', often seen on billboards outside churches advertising sermons on morality. Christianity certainly offers a radical critique of wealth. Jesus says that you can't serve God and Mammon. In Luke 8:22 he advises the rich young man who wants to be a disciple to sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. And most famously he says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. In our own culture we see the almost religious idolisation of wealth in the way we make icons out of film stars, footballers, and models, celebrating their life style in newspapers and glossy magazines and hankering after it. Wealth is seen as a virtue and flaunted in the face of poverty. How can we be rich and also be a Christian? Some Christians in North America have promoted the idea of 'prosperity' theology, which says that God rewards those who have faith, with material prosperity. Personally I find that theologically and morally a totally unacceptable idea. We must be aware of Jesus' call for the 'bias to the poor', used in the 1970s and 1980s as a slogan 'liberation theology', that rightly emphasised the social implications of Christianity, especially for the Third World. However, the gospel message is not anti-wealth per se. Jesus seemed to enjoy the company of the wealthy and to a large degree depended on their support for a ministry that otherwise had no funding. What he did emphasise, I think, is the importance of **contentment**, of knowing that enough is enough. One shouldn't be worrying about accumulating treasures on earth. *Consider the lilies of the field, which neither toil nor spin yet are dressed more beautifully than Solomon in all his glory.* This contentment with enough, and not always demanding more, is what being satisfied means and satisfaction is a real Christian virtue.

To many people's surprise, Jesus doesn't have much to say about sex. Matthew assures us that Jesus was conceived without sexual intercourse, and the gospels imply that he never married, and Jesus only makes two or

three allusions to sexual morality. It's really St Paul who gets Christians so hung up about it with his advice to the Corinthians (given in the light of his expectation of the imminent end of the world) not to marry, and his periodic reprimands about various improprieties. In reality, we all know that if the sex drives were less strong than they are, the human race simply wouldn't survive for salvation to take its course. In a sense then: no sex, no salvation! Our society has made a false god of sex by exploiting the erotic as the principal tool of advertising and the primary diet of entertainment and allowing the easy availability of pornography. You might say that as a liberal none of this should worry me, but liberalism is a disposition not an absolute. It works within a framework. The Christian liberal will apply a Christian critique to sexual ethics, which derives from Jesus' respect of persons and as far as possible will be liberating rather than repressive. It doesn't exclude pleasure. And pleasure certainly shouldn't be added to any list of false gods because Christianity isn't in principle kill-joy and shouldn't be guilt inducing. God gave us life and God gave us pleasure to be enjoyed.

As for power, we all have it, whether it's physical strength, power of personality, or the power given to our role in society: parent, manager, officer, priest, Member of Parliament. Even the so-called disempowered (the unemployed, old people on low incomes, the socially marginalized) are not totally without it. Personal power can be extended through money (spending power), clothes (power dressing), cars (power symbols) and weapons (fire power, nuclear power). For obvious reasons the survival instinct drives us to want to be powerful rather than weak, but the love of power can get out of hand. Jesus' message stands in critical opposition to the desire for power. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. This was an attitude he modelled at his own trial when, to the amazement of Pilate, he remained silent in the face of false accusations from the chief priests and elders. Also in Matthew there is the famous occasion when his opponents tried to trap him with the question whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor and he replied, *'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's'*. This has usually been taken to suggest that he was happy to keep the worldly politics and the spiritual in separate compartments, although there can be no doubt that his teaching had massive social and political implications. In fact he almost certainly believed that the end of the world order was at hand, so what did Rome matter? There was a new power about to break in, a spiritual power, when people would see the 'Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory'.

So we live in a moral maze: what is actually Good and what is actually Evil? How should we behave? We recoil from evil not simply in self-righteous indignation, but because we recognise that we are all human and that our potential for goodness is balanced by our potential for evil. It is frightening and indignation is partly a corporate goading of ourselves to be better, more loving, more responsible. That is one of the reasons why people go to church, I suspect: to find the spiritual resources that will help us to be better, more loving, more responsible people.