

St Faith's 2015 0830 Trinity 13: Proper 17

Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-9 / Psalm 15 / James 1.17-27 / Mark 7.1-8, 14, 15, 21-23

The readings we have just heard are all about what God wants human life to be like. In

Deuteronomy we heard how God expects his people to behave and how he wants them to be an example to all the nations around them. The Apostle James not only tells us to make sure our deeds match up to our words, but also reminds us that the Christian way of life is a gift from above. Most fiercely of all, in St Mark's gospel, Jesus tells his supposedly God-fearing hearers that they have abandoned God's commandment and take their cue from human tradition instead.

All three writers took it for granted that God has marked out and revealed the way we should live.

Contrast that with the findings of a recent survey that by-and-large the values and behaviour even of believers tend to owe more to their social environment than to their faith; in other words to quote Jesus, they (that is to say "we") are more likely to hold fast to human tradition than to the commandment of God.

So I don't think those biblical teachers would put any differently if they were writing today.

Although they were writing many centuries ago, they still challenge us, who claim to be Christians, to be honest about what make us tick, what's the real guiding light of our lives?

Putting it like this suggests that behind this question of how we behave, there is something else, another, more basic, question.

But before I get into that "something else", I would like to introduce you to a nineteenth century writer who described religion as "morality tinged with emotion", in other words as a code of conduct reinforced by feelings. This is reinforced by one of the effects of conscience: we feel pleasure when we've done something good and shame when we have done something wrong.

Religion as “morality tinged with emotion” is a very useful instrument of social control. Parents, teachers and politicians are all very ready to take advantage of this natural tendency. It’s not all bad. Provided our consciences are well taught, feelings of pleasure and guilt can be quite helpful.

Satisfaction when we do well and embarrassment at failure can make us more responsible people.

There is however a manipulative side to this as well. Governments, for example, are often keen to recruit the support of the Church for this that or the other policy, and are happy to encourage faith when it appears to be useful for their programmes for society - you, know, “upholding British values” (whatever they are supposed to be!). The media equally are fond of telling the Church, especially the Church of England that it ought to reflect public opinion.

It seems in modern British society, that Christianity (or any other faith for that matter) is tolerable either as a personal eccentricity or to the extent that it may be socially useful. But woe betide Christianity (or any other religion) if it lays claim to something wider than personal opinion, or if it challenges what public opinion today thinks is acceptable (which may of course be quite different from what it found acceptable yesterday or will find acceptable tomorrow!)

Please don’t get the idea I am attacking either politicians or the media for this. They are merely reflecting public opinion. I am not attacking public opinion either. Our views are created in a complicated way and owe something to what we feel, something to what we have been taught, something to what we have experienced and, possibly most powerful of all, what our family, tribe, party or nation think - or perhaps what our favourite newspaper or news channel tells us - it all adds up to what, for reasons we probably can’t easily explain, simply seem to us the way things should be.

One of the problems about allowing this to guide our lives is that public opinion is always changing, blown this way and that by changing events.

This bring me back to the “something else” that a moment ago I said lies behind how Christians should behave. It is fundamental to the approach of this morning’s readings.

They all take for granted the reality of God; of God the creator, of God who gives a law so that human beings might be truly free. That’s where Christianity parts company with “morality tinged with emotion”, with public opinion and with the kind of religion unbelievers would like us to hold.

These things might be socially useful, but they don’t tell us anything about whether our morality is based on anything true.

As Christians however we are disciples of Jesus who described himself as “the way, the truth and the life” and who, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.

The only secure foundation for behaviour is faith.

Of course we must be ready to discuss what makes for a good society openly with members of other faiths and of no faith at all and we must always be keen to collaborate with everyone whose values coincide or overlap with ours. But we must never forget that the Christian view of the good society is based on our faith in God who has revealed his will.

None of this means of course that the answers to all our moral dilemmas are given us on a plate, so to speak. Never forget that Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would remind them of all he had taught them and would lead them into all the truth. Because it is the same Holy Spirit who both reminds and leads, we need to understand what God has already revealed in the past and trust his continued guidance today.

How we think about the good life and how we try to behave isn’t arbitrary but follows directly from our belief in God. For us as Christians, belief in God doesn’t mean having clever ideas about the universe but depending on God as the living source of our life, our knowledge and our hope.