

Bristol Cathedral June 5th 2016
Second Sunday after Trinity
Galatians 1.11-end & Luke 11-17
Canon Bruce Saunders

There are some words almost guaranteed to make Anglican congregations shift uneasily in their seats. One is Prayer – because most of us feel guilty at not praying well enough, or often enough, or because we're not entirely sure what we're doing when we do. The other word is Mission. There was an audible sigh of relief around the Church of England a few years ago when trendy preachers started quoting that phrase attributed to St Francis – 'Preach the Gospel and use words if you must'. 'Thank heaven', people said. 'We don't have to talk about our faith!' So much easier to do your elderly neighbour's shopping than to talk about God!

Actions may well speak louder than words. But what if it isn't volume that matters?

What St Francis said may have been OK in 13th Century Italy, but it won't do today. He lived in a time that historians call 'Christendom' when everything from the crowning of kings to the success of the turnip harvest was believed to be down to the will of God. We live in a different world.

The most recent British Social Attitudes survey shows that nearly half the adult population in England and Wales now describe themselves as having 'No religion'. The same pattern is seen all across Europe and increasingly in the US too.

The newspaper article where I first saw this reported led to an interesting crop of thoughtful letters and follow-up articles, mainly about whether human society can have a moral framework that isn't based on religious faith. It's a debate that theologians have been having for some time with the secular fundamentalists and the Humanists with a capital 'H' who argue that you don't need to believe in God to value freedom, justice and equality. It's certainly true that there are countless generous, caring, creative people around who have no religious faith. But they often seem to believe that these values are self-evident and, given science, democracy and capitalism, things will just get better and better in the best of all possible worlds. It's a popular view in the media and among liberal, educated, affluent people like us. I'm not sure the Palestinians or the people of Zimbabwe would agree, or the youngsters sleeping in doorways in our own cities.

An American theologian called David Bentley Hart has thought and written a lot about this issue. He likens Western secular humanism to a bunch of flowers, cut from the garden and arranged in a vase. They look beautiful for a while, but severed from the bulb that feeds them, sooner or later they wilt. As a historical example he points to how Germany, with its centuries of Christian culture, became so easily and so quickly subverted in the first half of the 20th century. It's when the cold wind blows and our better selves are under pressure that we need access to the source of our values, to remind us where our good values come from and why we cherish them.

A leader writer in the Guardian made the same point: *Although human rights have become embedded in our institutions at the same time as religious observance has been in decline, they could become vulnerable in an entirely post-Christian environment where the collective memory slips from the old moorings inherited from Christian ethics.*

So if we want to prevent this slipping away from the collective Christian memory, we're going to have to use words as well as actions. Loving actions are of value in themselves, of course, but they have lost the resonance they once had. What I mean is this.

In today's Gospel, Jesus restores to life the widow's son. *'Fear seized the people and they glorified God saying 'God has looked favourably on his people'.* That was a time when the old resonance still worked. The people who saw this and other miracles put two and two together – well actually what they put together was Genesis chapter 1, Exodus chapters 14 and 16, large chunks of Isaiah and a bunch of psalms – so when they saw Jesus stilling a storm, feeding the people, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, their collective memory told them that this was none other than God at work. The Gospel writers who told these stories assumed their readers would also be able to read the signs and see who Jesus is. For many centuries, in the Christendom years, people could; but not today, at least not in our culture.

People today need to learn to see not only what things are but what they mean. And that may well need an explanatory note attached. Nothing as crass as a Christian saying 'It's not me holding this door open for you, madam, it's Jesus!' but we're likely to have to use words. It's all very well for St Paul to boast to the Galatians this morning that his faith came not through any human agency but directly from God. But for most of the Galatians and for most us, our God-given faith does come through people – teachers, parents, friends – and if the people of our time are to hear the story of God's love, if the collective memory is not to be lost, then it will be through us that they hear it. People today, ourselves included, need help to connect the narrative of our individual lives with the narrative of God's great purpose revealed in creation and in Jesus Christ. Not all human beings are nice. Loving is not always easy. The Christian story tells us why human beings matter, why love is important – for the times when our natural instinct fails or gets weary.

So if the good news of God's love is to be known to the next generation, if churches are not to be turned into tyre depots and cathedrals into museums to a long-dead culture, then we need to wake up to the missionary task. The change is going on all around us, and within us. We ourselves are much more questioning, far less dutifully 'religious' than we used to be. For the Church simply to go on doing what it's always done in defiance of all the evidence that it is no longer communicating is not the answer. The forces of secularism that are already gnawing through our roots, may have freed us from our own dogmatic past, (and we may well be glad about that), but once cut off from the source of our life and values we are easy prey to those who turn love into pragmatism and human beings into commodities. I believe loving action matters, but I believe that we urgently need to ensure that our actions, like those of Jesus, like sacraments, speak of things beyond themselves, that they speak of the love of God who is our source and only sure foundation.

You know the story of the old man who lived by himself. One day the postman delivered a small parcel. The old man didn't often get a parcel. He quickly pulled off several layers of wrapping paper – and there, inside was a piece of cheese - his favourite kind, blue and smelly. The wrapping paper was a bit smelly too so he scrunched it up and binned it. He tried a bit, and another bit, and by the end of the day the mystery cheese was all gone.

A few days later he got a phone call from his granddaughter. 'Grandad', she said, sounding a bit worried, 'Did you get the cheese I sent you the other day?' 'Oh' said Grandad, 'I didn't know it was from you.' 'I put a little card inside', she said. 'Silly old me', said grandad, I must have thrown it away with the wrapping paper. What did it say on the card?' 'It said Dear Grandad, here is some of your favourite cheese, from Sophie with love.' 'Oh thank you, Sophie,' said Grandad. 'I got the cheese but I didn't get the love. I liked the cheese, but the love is even better.'

Mission is about helping the people of our time to get the love as well as the cheese!