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Christ before Chapel, Cross before country, Confession before culture

by Revd Brian Matthews

That there were only twenty-four weeks to Christmas when the address was delivered earlier this month had no bearing on its choice of text, 'I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.' It was chosen because this is the first statement about Jesus after His birth. It is amazing because it will not be Herod who will be Lord despite his kind offer to build a temple, nor will it be Caesar. The Lord will be the one, although born to the humblest of parents in the humblest of circumstances. God is not to be found in the structures of state or wealth, but in the baby born in Bethlehem who was laid in a manger.

The three pointed theme chosen by Revd Brian Matthews for his year as Moderator, "Christ before Chapel, Cross before country, confession before Culture / Crist cyn capel, y groes cyn gwlad, defosiwn cyn diwylliant" were developed in the closing address that he delivered from the pulpit of Trinity, Wrexham where he is a member and past minister.

Christ before Chapel

A few months back the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris burned down leading to a debate among people about faith and the importance of buildings. I enjoyed listening to these debates on the radio and reading them in the newspaper. One person, being interviewed, remarked that if the buildings are spaces where people can gather in a meaningful way to share faith, and to commune in a lively way so that the people bring themselves to God, then they are beautiful places. But it is the people within who make it beautiful though many would argue that architecture also does that. I question this last point when I think about Jesus' reply to His disciples when they said to Him in Jerusalem, "Master, what fine buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Mark 13:2.) Let us ask ourselves honestly, what is our relation to our buildings and our function within them remembering the status of the birth of Jesus and that we are not a preservation society. The Bible stories are about people who are called,

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people who move, a God who is ahead of His people in the wilderness and who will not be contained in any human structure. When we think that we have arrived and become settled and content, dare I suggest that we are on the path to straying? We have a mission in the world to make Jesus known to people, and His Way is not the way of the world.

I do not only mean buildings when I talk about Christ before Chapel. There is a culture about it: the hymn sandwich, the routine of the service, the layout of the chapel, can all become over important and induce a culture of a comfort zone for us. As long as we maintain it we may drift into thinking that we serve God in this way alone. Christ must always come first and if we do not proclaim Him then we have indeed lost our way. The routine does not matter, but it does matter if I hold grudges against people and fail to forgive as I am forgiven by God; whether we have an organ, band, or neither, does not matter, but it does matter that I, with the help of the Spirit of God, do not judge people in any way because Jesus has taught us to love as perfectly as God loves us. Our Bethels and Bethesdas are not critical in the Kingdom of God, but our desire for purity of heart

food and the loveliest people imaginable even if every February and March our representatives knock lumps out of each other on the rugby pitch, some more successfully than others!

I have said before that Jesus was murdered because of political and religious expediency. He was a threat to the priestly class in Jerusalem and then Pilate was informed,



by them, that He was a threat to him. Following John, the one we call the Baptist, Jesus spoke truth to the powerful and the shadow of their disapproval hovers darkly over the Gospel accounts. This threat is the one that they cannot deal with. If it was armed insurrection it would be obvious and easily put down with brutal force. This, however, was the voice of the One who was powerless who was attracting the ordinary people, and worldly power never likes that. When I say "Cross before country", what I mean is the way of the cross before the support of unjust and corrupt power structures, or other more benign power structures when they are an elite who choose paths which leave out or victimise many. We must be prepared to speak out against these structures even if it does mean losing our friends and them turning against us. Did Jesus not say, the world will hate you because it first hated me?

Amongst the best known examples of Christian people facing up to this challenge is Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

There is a scenario in our political life where we may have to face up to this in our country. Would we be willing to hide the Jew in the attic? It is so easy to wander into blind nationalism and to think that what we do is always justified, and the same is only wrong when others do it to us. In other words it is all right for us to do it to them, but it is

abhorrent if they do it to us.

I am not saved by being the perfect gentleman and law abiding citizen as noble as that might be, salvation comes through Christ, our ultimate security does not come from military might but through Christ and His sacrifice for us.

What do these names mean to you? Rutilio Grande, Alfonso Navarro, Ernesto Barrera, Octavio Ortiz, Rafael Palacios; Napoleón Macías. If I add Oscar Romero, it will give you the clue. They were all Christian bishops who were assassinated by their governments between 1977 and 1979. But the most famous quote from that era belongs to Helder Camara, "When giving to the poor they call me a saint when I ask why the poor have no food they call me a communist?"

Confession before culture

Culture is a fine thing: music, song, legend and story, history, all go together to make up our cultures. How easy it is to slip into thinking that following the cultural norm is the Christian Way. We are a Confessional Church, one that confesses that Jesus is Lord, one that accepts the announcement of the angels to the shepherds.

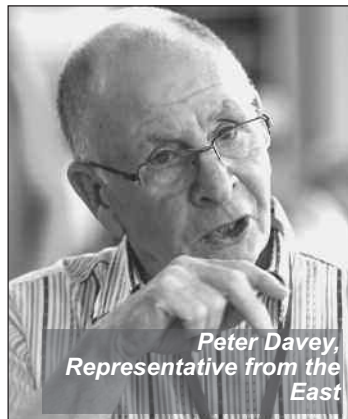
What I mean is the culture of a society that is not wholesome. What is our culture in this early 21st century? I dare to say that it is a worldly one where individualism has displaced the sense of community and social cohesion, where differences are now more important than what unites us as human beings made in the likeness and image of God. It is a culture of the strong over the weak, the majority claiming superiority over any minority, which now includes worshipping Christians. Sadly, it is a culture of us and them. It is a society based on greed that cares little about the downtrodden; one that extols the principle that might is right; one that appears to be quite at ease with insulting people who are different in creed or colour; or class or gender.

Our culture does not equal following Jesus. When there has been religious input into that culture, perhaps over a long period it is hard to admit that we need to hear the Gospel message anew to be able to discern what is of Christ and what is of ourselves. Is this not what Jesus was saying when He spoke about old and new wineskins? It is often said that Christianity is counter-cultural and we have a message for the world today. We confess that He is Christ the Lord, and thus He must be the Lord of our lives and not every passing whim and fancy of this world. During my year as Moderator the most meaningful part was to hear the story of the Mizo people who were head hunters prior to our missionaries arriving. This was their culture, but the Gospel changed it right around inasmuch that they now know that God's love is for everyone.

How do we speak out against the prevailing culture? Speaking up for the unloved, the unwelcome, the stranger is difficult, and often invites hostility. As the hymnist puts it, 'will you risk the hostile stare?'



"For to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord," was the angels' message to the shepherds. Our Lord is that person who was born there that night in such humble circumstances. The One was the Word made flesh; the One who faithfully fulfilled His mission in God; to the extent that He went to the cross. He is our Lord, the Lord of all our lives, and the Lord of all our life. Let us be aware of putting anything before Him and endeavour to follow Him without fear knowing that He is with us until the end of time.



Peter Davey, Representative from the East

is, and that realisation that we, the human beings following Jesus, are the Church. As we face the future as a denomination, it is not what was, but what will be. We proclaim Christ not through preserving buildings and structures but by seeing people coming to know Him and responding to His Call to exacting service.

Cross before country

We all love our countries, we all have the best scenery, the best