

20150222LentI_Liberal Christianity 1

How do you feel about the word liberal? If I were to say to you, "Oh, you're a typical liberal" would you feel insulted or carry that title with pride? The word 'Liberal' is approached differently by different people. For some it is practically a curse. For some others it describes them perfectly but they don't like it too much because they are open to other ways of doing things too. So the word liberal is attacked from all sides.

If this is the case with the word liberal, imagine how even more difficult it is to bear the title - Liberal Christian. It is open to so much criticism. A liberal Christian is criticised for having rose-tinted optimism about all things, they are criticised for being too tolerant – both intellectually and morally. They are criticised for being too inclusive, to the extent that a Liberal Christian is viewed as being irreligious.

Morally critics of Liberal Christianity say it allows too many compromises with the spirit of the age. It replaces God's authority with moral relativism. They also say that it is easy to be a Liberal Christian in a stable, wealth society but not so easy in a society that is suffering persecution. Therefore Liberal Christianity is viewed by some as a decadent religion.

Now as we spend the next five Sundays looking at Liberal Christianity we will find that many of these criticisms do hold water. But some of these same beliefs are also held in many other forms of Christianity to a varied degree. So as an example we must ask, "Can believers in any moral tradition isolate themselves from society and culture?"

Brian Mountford, whose book *Perfect Freedom* is the basis of this Lenten Course of sermon says he would rather call Liberal Christianity "*Christianity Unchained.*" But that does make us ask, "Unchained from what?" Well, unchained from Biblical, moral and Churchy fundamentalism. For example, he would like to be able to explore the bible's poetry without having to take it too literally; when he thinks about right or wrong he wants to be free to explore the spirit rather than the letter of the law; when he comes to church he wants to be free from obsessions about ritualistic details in the liturgy he uses in worship.

What Brian Mountford makes quite clear is the freedom, he is looking for is not anarchy, but perfect freedom. It might surprise some who think that liberal Christianity is a 'anything goes' faith or that it is all questions and no answers to find that there is shape and order to it but shape and order designed to liberate believers.

So what theological premise underpins Liberal Christianity? I would say the generosity and prodigality of God as show in parables of Sower and of Prodigal Son. Notice how the Sower casts seed with extravagant generosity; showing no discrimination where the seed lands. The same generosity can be seen in the Father of prodigal son. He was exploited by his son who then squandered his inheritance. When his son returns instead of criticising him, he gives him new clothes, a ring and throws a party for him.

That same generosity of spirit can be seen in Jesus' dislike of hypocrisy and showy religion. We heard on Ash Wednesday that if you fast you are not to put ash on your face to show that you are fasting, if you give money as a donation you are to give it anonymously. Other aspects of Jesus' character seem to acknowledge this perfect freedom, this unchained Christianity. Jesus comes across as a rebellious, non-establishment, creative, exploratory man who chooses simple fishermen (not high powered intellectual theologians) to be his disciples. He was a prophetic and enigmatic character who liked the wilderness, who was open to all members of the public, sinners, outcasts and women. He broke boundaries when he said in a sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth that he was bringing good news to poor and freedom to captives.

I've used the phrase – Perfect freedom at least twice so far. Do any of you recognise it? It is a phrase in a Morning Prayer Collect : *O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life, to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us your humble servants from all assaults of our enemies; that we may trust in your defence, and not fear the power of any adversaries; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen... Whose service is perfect freedom* – this is such a beautiful paradox – how can service be freedom?

There are three points which are the backbone of Christian Liberalism. Firstly, God's values must be liberating not restrictive. (A bit of the 'thou shalt' and less of the 'thou shalt not's'). Secondly, God expects us to live by values of love, peace, generosity, self-control. Thirdly our faith rather than being a killjoy and life denying should be life affirming. If we look at Jesus we will see this is the path he took. As Paul said to the Philippians, God took the form of a slave by being born in human likeness then through obedience to death on a cross brought about universal **liberation** of humankind.

Okay, you might be agreeing with all that I've said so far, but where can we find such a Church which offers Liberal Christianity? There so many denominations and church divisions. The modern church seems to be fragmented into hundreds of denomination and how many of them call themselves non-denominational? Even within denominations huge variety is found. This is especially the case in Anglicanism. Why are there these churchmanship divisions?

Well, they occur over things like biblical interpretation, moral understanding – same sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia etc., styles of worship (modern or traditional), leadership and authority (matters such as priests, bishops or even house church leaders being women) and whether the church should engage with society or withdrawing from the world (I suppose this is the church and politics issue which arose in the UK this week after their Bishop brought out a Pastoral Letter telling the people what they should be looking for in a political party if they are Christians). Some these differences will be what we will explore over the next few weeks. Churches spend time and energy arguing with each other over these issues to detriment to the image of Christianity – we could say we are fiddling while Rome burns

Brian Mountford who is the Vicar of University Church of St Mary's, Oxford received a letter from a student, which expresses at first hand what Liberal Christianity is. Let me read it to you:

'I started going to St Mary's nearly three years ago. At that time I was looking for an open and questioning approach to Christianity. I felt unhappy and confused because my Christian life and beliefs seemed to have little to do with my experience of ordinary life and contemporary events. While 'doing the rounds' of the Oxford Churches I decided to go to the Sunday Parish Eucharist at the University Church. I was surprised! Despite the formal title and imposing architecture, I felt at home. The service left me spiritually uplifted, the sermon resonated with my everyday experience and above all I felt that my faith in Jesus Christ needed further exploration. St Mary's has given me the room to be myself and to explore my doubts and fears. I don't want to belong to a church that tells me they have all the answers, because God is bigger than any of us and I believe we ought to live out the Gospel by exploring our faith, by loving others, by prayer, and by a commitment to social action.' Is this students struggle a bit like yours>

I want to conclude this opening sermon on Liberal Christianity by giving you a summary of it. Liberal Christianity is biblical, open, liturgically conservative, traditional, ethical, public, and concerned with Christian action. What do I mean by all these descriptors? Well, being **Biblical** means that Liberals value Scripture as much as anyone because it is the foundation of faith. Scripture reveals the nature of God and tells the story of salvation. But Scripture requires critical appraisal and we must try to read the Bible creatively and critically.

Liberal Christianity is **Open** because Liberals believe that Christian discipleship and theological understanding is an ongoing, developing process and they therefore expect theological ideas to be questioned in the same way as other knowledge claims are questioned. They believe that faith is enriched when Christianity is in dialogue with other disciplines such as science and literature.

Liberals tend to be **inclusive** rather than exclusive. That is, they try not to hold a narrow view of what it is to be Christian and to be open to people who approach Christianity from unconventional or uncertain positions. Liberals celebrate the pluralism and diversity of human culture for all the variety and colour it offers. They don't want everyone to be the same and they see the importance of honouring and respecting people of other faiths and of no faith. This is not to diminish or water down Christianity - they affirm their Christian faith proudly - but it is humbly to acknowledge the variety of God's creation.

Liberals tend to be **Liturgically conservative**. Perhaps this is because liberal theology is often exploratory and risk-taking, liberals at worship, like something familiar and secure. In Anglicanism liberals tend to go for the traditional Eucharistic liturgy shared with the Roman Catholic Church. This gives a sense of historic continuity and also a sense of belonging to a wide Church. Those who make significant links between theology and the creative arts naturally prefer beautiful worship.

When it comes to **Ethics**, the liberal moral view is sometimes caricatured as one in which 'anything goes'. In fact liberals have a high sense of morality based on the teaching of Jesus. Jesus' (God's) self-giving love is seen as a model for all moral action. Jesus did not create a moral code with provision for all situations, but he did give a clear principle for making moral decisions, namely - what would be the most selflessly loving action in any particular circumstances? This is the model that persuades liberals to try to be compassionate and humane in moral matters.

For liberal's faith is **Public**. While Christian tradition sets up an dualistic opposition between the 'church' and the 'world' and the 'spirit' and the 'flesh', the liberal emphasis is on the incarnation, on the Word becoming flesh. This means that Christian theology should take its agenda from the world and should engage with the public issues of the day. Christianity belongs not just in the churches, but in the market place, the media, politics, and in the streets. Christianity must, by definition, avoid being segregated or self-protectively introspective.

The liberal slogan for evangelism would be St Francis of Assisi's instruction to his Brothers, 'Preach the Gospel everywhere, if necessary using words'. Christian action should be the natural by-product of Christian faith and Christianity's greatest advertisement.

In the past I have been criticised in my preaching because I ask lots of questions but don't give many answers. So is Liberal Christianity all questions and no answers? Well, let me give you some direct answers now.

- God exists
- Jesus Christ was a historical figure who revealed the nature of God
- The Bible is our principle source of Christian Faith
- The Church's tradition has crystallised many of the basic issues of faith
- Many people are persuaded to believe because of their religious experience
- Faith presents us with moral imperatives, ideals and standards
- There is a tension between faith and reason
- To question a belief is not to dismiss it but to refine it
- I believe in the reality of God, but often wonder where God is in a particular situation, especially in suffering and evil.

I hope that our exploration of Liberal Christianity this Lent will show that it might be the answer to your faith.