

In Thinking Be Adult

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At the centre of the worshipping life of the Church at Corinth was what is called speaking in tongues. The mind switches and from the unconscious comes a stream of meaningless sounds or words. Paul is deeply disturbed. The practice is not wrong but it should not be a central part of Christian worship. Rather 5 words of sense than thousands of words in tongues. He drives home the point, "Brothers and sisters, do not be childish in your thinking, be infants in evil, but in your thinking be adults."

The challenge is when we worship are we stretching our minds, are we being adult not childish in our thinking? Sometimes religion fails this test. I was listening on the radio to the BBC series which is telling the history of the world by reference to a 100 different objects. One of these was a stone spear head dated to the Clovis people in North America around 13,000 years ago. The DNA evidence makes it clear the ancestors of the Clovis people had come into North America from Asia. But we were told this was hotly disputed by some Native Americans whose religious traditions tell them that life began by people by being created from the earth or falling from the sky, or being created from the back of a water beetle. This was their deeply held belief and to them the scientific evidence was an affront.

Instinctively my reaction was pretty dismissive. Scientific evidence can't be ignored simply because a religious tradition doesn't like it. Facts are facts and Native Americans will just have to accept that.

And then I thought, wait a minute. Before I start throwing stones at Native American religion. How is that any different from what many Christians do? Don't nearly half the population of the USA believe the world was created less than 10,000 years ago? Young earth creationism they call it. Many believe the world was created in 4000 BC – that is 7000 years after the Clovis axe was made. If you go to Petersburg Kentucky you can find a 27 million dollar museum which seeks to show the world is only 6000 years old, that humans and dinosaurs shared the earth, and there were dinosaurs on Noah's ark. Come to think of it George W Bush say that when it comes to evolution the jury is still out? And come to think of it aren't there people in this country who want the idea that the world is 7000 years younger than the Clovis Axe taught in our science lessons?

Mind you I've known worse! I once met in a minister from Indiana who told he believed the world was flat? He had flown over from America. That hadn't convinced him. After all, as someone said, if the world is round why are people in Australia not standing on their heads?

Let me tell you a fairy story. There was once a very trusting person. His business had gone bankrupt and his wife had left him and he was thinking of ending it all on a bridge by the river. Then he saw a ragged old toothless woman watching him from under a lamppost. "Don't do it" she said. "What business it is of yours" he answered bitterly. "I'm a good fairy," she replied, "and I can give you any two wishes". "Two wishes. You mean I could get my wife my and my business back" stammered the man? "Yes" she said. "We fairies require no favours only a loving embrace from a human being". Overcome the man took the ragged old woman in his arms and gave her a long kiss. She gave him a great toothless smile and gazed at him dreamily. "How old are you" she asked. "42" "Hum. 42 and you still believe in fairies".

Well, you've been warned. "Brothers and sisters, do not be childish in your thinking, be infants in evil, but in your thinking be adults."

Let me say this morning as clearly as I can. Jesus came to take away our sins, not our minds. "Worship the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind" says Jesus. "In thinking be adult" says Paul.

Christianity is a thinking faith. You can see it Paul – look at the marvellous power of the letter to the Romans. Or look to the Reformation and to John Calvin. At the Reformation Calvin did as much as anyone to shape the modern world. And how did he do it– from his study and his pulpit. He moved the world by giving it ideas. From him came a new idea of the Church – with authority coming from the bottom not the top and with people having the right to elect their leaders both as church and state. From him came the idea that religion belongs not just inside the church but in personal and public life. From him above all, came the gospel of grace – that we are loved by God because of his amazing grace, not because of anything we do or deserve. All this came from a man in his study in love with ideas.

Later Protestantism was renewed by John Wesley – he too a preacher of grace. For him religion was based on 4 things, scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Christianity is commitment to stretching our minds. The Wesley quadrilateral they call it. "In thinking be adult". To be a Christian is to seek to understand these strange lives of ours.

Life is a puzzling business, full of wonders and tragedies, mysteries and marvels. One day we are a child, the next a youth, before we know where we are the years have slipped away. Have you noticed how the words we used to describe our birthdays change? "I'm going to be sixteen" we say with warm anticipation. "I'll soon be 21." It can't come too quickly. Then it changes. We "turn 30". We "push forty", we "reach 50" we "make it to 60". Then we "hit 70". After that if we get to the 80s or 90 we try to go backwards. "I'm only 92". Life rushes by and there are basic questions which cannot be avoided. Where did I come from? Where do I go do?

By and large our culture tells us such questions have no meaning. We are born to shop, what more do we need to know that that? But doesn't life mean more than that? Wordsworth thought so "Trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home". "In thinking be adults" says Paul. Doesn't that mean taking seriously the great questions of our lives?

There is the religious experience. It all kinds of ways it brushes up against our lives. It may be I experience it through nature. I see bare trees against a winter sky in my native Norfolk and there's a wonder and a glory. Or last summer the family spent a week on Skye and went over for the first time to Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Long empty white beaches and distant islands – a great calm. And I remembered the words of a poet looking out over the sea of the Hebrides.

"In such a place as this the very wind is like a prayer
I am the meeting of the land and sea,
I am the presence on the hills and in the far islands."

There's a wonder to life, a glory. Or it may be a person who makes me see it – physically there are nothing special – but inwardly where does that love come from? Or maybe I'm, listening to music and glory touches my soul. Or I in church and I am swept up in wonder,

love and praise. There is something in life which atheism can never explain. We may call it the holy, the eternal, God - it does not matter what we call it, it is beyond every name. But there is still small voice, a marvel, a mystery, a love which seeks us and will not let us go. There is something that atheism cannot explain.

All this finds its centre in the person of Jesus. He came from a totally obscure village. Do you know they were excavating Nazareth last year and they estimate it was a village of about 50 houses? The fact they found no glass or imported products indicates a very simple life-style. Who would have imagined a carpenter's son from here would be the centre of the hope for half of human kind because he has touched their lives and we have seen God in him? There is something here too that atheism cannot explain.

At the heart of it is the gospel of grace - it is God that made us; we are his. You and I belong to God. We are not cogs on a wheel, units in a political process; we are not consumers, targets for advertising. We—at the very core of our being—belong to God. We are God's people, the sheep of his pasture.

Somehow we try and grasp what this means. For this good thinking is not only permitted it is required. If Science or any thing else can help us on the way we ought to be grateful for it. As John Calvin said "We are at liberty to borrow from any source anything that has come from God". Of course the truth is greater than we can ever fully grasp but we reach for it, seeking to "follow truth, and thus to follow thee". We reach for it confident that the lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.

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