

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 6 Year C 2019

One of America's most important Christian publications, Christianity Today recently ran the headline article: '*Christian, what do you believe? Probably a heresy about Jesus, says survey.*' The article opened that American evangelicals are "deeply confused" about some core doctrines of the Christian faith and that the fourth-century heretic Arius would be pleased. The assertion was based on a survey of some 3000 Americans. The researchers concluded that overall, US adults appear to have a superficial attachment to well-known Christian beliefs. For example, they said, a majority agreed that Jesus died on the cross for sin and that he rose from the dead. But, 'they rejected the Bible's teaching on the gravity of man's sin, the importance of the church's gathering together for worship, and the Holy Spirit.'

Now, the great fault of the survey, I think is that its results were drawn from the general public with only a certain percentage identifying as Christians, and the questions indicating a certain evangelical bent. I don't think we need to worry about what the general public thinks about Christian belief, though of course nominally, most Americans would consider themselves Christian. But for those who even identified as evangelical in the survey, there is trouble....

Perhaps most concerning is that 78% respondents who identified themselves as evangelical said Jesus was the first and greatest being created by God. In other words, the majority of so-called evangelical Christians in America are in fact Arians. It is this finding that gives the article its headline. This ancient heresy is named after Arius, a priest of the Alexandrian church in North Africa from the fourth Century. As a way of proposing an alternative to classic Christology, he argued that Jesus *was the highest and first* of God's creation. So, according to Arius, Jesus was not *equal* with the Father, but a sort of demi-god (as in the myths of old). And this became a powerful thread in Christian thought for decades - even centuries - after Arius' death. His proposal was powerful and attractive. And a lot of people at the time signed up to it.

But all the great ecumenical councils reject this proposal. Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon all argued that Jesus *was not* semi-divine, or simply divine or simply human. But *fully divine, fully human*. The creed we have just recited spells it out for us: *God from God, light from light, very from very God. Begotten, not made. Consubstantial* (the same substance/essence) *with the Father*. Now, these are all statements directly responding to the Arian claims. Our creed rehearses for us each week the battle with Arius and his followers. The survey suggests – and I have no doubt it wouldn't be too much different here – a battle we *still* need to fight. It is surely one of the advantages of liturgical churches (such as ours) as distinct from evangelical churches (which mostly are not liturgical), that the creed *is* placed before us week by week. Reciting the creed regularly anchors us in the core beliefs of our faith. Or in the image provided by the prophet Jeremiah today, it helps us place '*deep roots*' in our faith.

We need it to also keep us grounded in a true faith on nature and work of the Holy Spirit. The survey again suggests that the majority of respondents thought the Holy Spirit some as sort of 'impersonal force'. But the essential insight of biblical religion - from start to finish - is that God seeks *relationship* with us, who wants to change us, who wants to form us into the image of the Son. Dismiss the Spirit as some sort of vague force and we dismiss the possibility of relationship with the living God.

So, there is difficulty in how mainstream Christians understand Jesus and Spirit, but also how salvation works. Something like 82% of respondent said that they could turn to God of their own initiative and 74 % that we could contribute to our own salvation. Again, nothing new in these assertions. But also, nothing new in the church formally rejecting these ideas! The idea that we can choose God by the strength of our own will was taught by a fifth-century monk named Pelagius, who was a frequent theological opponent of Augustine. Pelagius's beliefs were again condemned at the ecumenical councils. And Jeremiah's opening words in the first reading today, '*a curse on the man who puts his trust in man*' reminds us of the dangers of relying on misguided notions of human capacity. We might think we're pretty good. The scriptures, and orthodox faith, are consistently more realistic...

The ideas of Pelagius are so dangerous because they so completely undermine the law of grace St Paul is at such pains to argue is at the very heart of the gospel. Take the ideas of Pelagius to its natural conclusion, we don't actually need a saviour, because if we work hard enough, strive enough, control ourselves enough, well, then we can make ourselves good enough. Now, this of course this corresponds perfectly with the cult of self-help and self-improvement that afflicts us today: work hard enough and apply ourselves enough then we can perfect ourselves.

And this further confirms the survey's findings of respondents' reluctance to accept the gravity of sin. The predominant view of our age is that I'm ok, and you're ok, and deep down we're all in fact nice people. And that's probably widely held by most people. But it certainly *is not* the biblical and classical Christian view of human nature. If that's true then indeed we don't need a saviour. And that's what's happened, of course. Jesus has become not a saviour but a teacher of vague spiritual principles, a self-help guru on the path to self-improvement. Perhaps, to be fair, the kind of Jesus as presented in the Gospel today. It's attractive. Its easy to digest. Appealing to those who might not have a particularly firm religious conviction about who Jesus is. Jesus appears here as one arguing for a better world, turning the world upside down in a way so favoured by radicals and revolutionaries.

Which just goes to show, of course the danger of taking one piece of scripture in isolation from the wider vision of scripture! Before Luke presents us with this version of Jesus' sermon, the crowds come to hear Jesus, yes, but also to be cured of their diseases. In the biblical mind, this is a sign of God working, of God's action. Through Jesus, in word and deed, God speaks and acts. The gospels *will not* permit us to see Jesus just as some sort of political revolutionary upsetting the social order. But Jesus as teacher/guru/inspiring-figure-from-the past/revolutionary is all we are left with if we pluck him out of the wider context of the faith. Paul reminds us, though, in the Epistle today of the heart of the matter: that if we want to understand who Jesus is - and what God has worked through him, and how that impacts us - then we need to look to the cross and his resurrection. Any true, authentic Christian faith begins and ends there. In the light of the empty tomb we come to see the full implications of what faith in Jesus involves.

All of Christian faith – as St Paul so rightly puts to us – is an outworking of the implications of the Resurrection. Anything which diminishes this, is a departure from Christian faith, and must be rejected as such. It must be rejected because it is not what God himself has revealed.

My brothers and sisters, you would know how we are supposed to be all-embracing, inclusive, open to everything and everyone. Every idea and every experience is supposed to be of the same and equal value. The culture we inhabit detests the idea that there might be some sort of boundary around belief, a limit to inclusion; that there might be some sort of perimeter which contains we might call ‘authentic Christian belief.’ But there is. It doesn’t mean uniformity in faith and experience. It doesn’t mean we impose ourselves with violence and force, so others recognise what we know to be true. But it does mean we are willing to defend the faith when the needs arise. And to argue for it. As mature and committed Christians I would hope you all make the effort to inform yourselves about what makes for authentic Christian faith. The subjectivism and emotionalism and individualism which shape our culture will make this no easy task. But faithful Christians can not settle for an idea that ‘anything goes.’

The heresies which have classically sought to undermine orthodox Christian belief could perhaps be summed up as having either a too high a view of humankind and too low a view of God; a too optimistic view of our capacities, a too impoverished view of God’s mystery. Clearly, this is still something we still need to work hard on. Clearly, there are battles for the faith that still need to be fought. Amen.